

***Practice Theory, Ancestor Worship, and Ritual:
An Alternative Approach to a Cross-cultural Understanding of
Chinese Culture***

by

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In other words, this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgment is made in the text of the thesis.


L. Lakos
18/11/09



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Abstract

An exposition and analysis of Chinese ancestor worship and its correlations, especially filial piety and ritual, will show its intrinsic importance to Chinese culture, both normatively and epistemologically. By using a practice theory - ritual approach the thesis highlights the relationship between the rituals of ancestor worship and their meaning within Chinese culture. In emphasizing the efficacy of ritual to cultural meaning the thesis offers an alternative approach to the dominant discourse which regards Confucianism as the prime cultural symbol and paradigm of Chinese culture. This thesis proposes that the practice of ancestor worship has underpinned Chinese culture in many influential and vital ways and provides a nuanced and more efficacious paradigm through which Chinese culture may be viewed. This is a new approach which finds its inception in a number of contemporary theories related to both practice theory and ritual communication theory, and suggests that this symbolic- practice oriented approach, with an associated focus on ritual and rituals, will overcome the ethno-centered biases of other traditional and conventional approaches.

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Introduction

A New Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture

Today, as the different peoples of the world find themselves inextricably bound together in some form of globalization, it is imperative we have a better understanding of each other and each other's culture. The Western world's need to understand China, due to contemporary changes and challenges, makes the task even more urgent and important. Raymond Dawson (1967, 7) alerts us to this need when he writes, 'As the world shrinks and China swells, our ignorance becomes more dangerous'. The West's understanding of China and Chinese culture is problematical to a significant degree as a consequence of Western hegemony and ethno-centrism imposing its own values, meanings, and conceptual paradigms (Al-Azmeh 1991, 468), and the problematic has been further exacerbated by the Chinese themselves as they internalize the Western understanding.

In order to ameliorate and overcome the epistemological problematic of a cross-cultural understanding of China, a new approach to the understanding of China and Chinese culture is proposed. This thesis proposes that the practice of ancestor worship has underpinned Chinese culture in many influential and vital ways, and a focus on the practice of ancestor worship and its corollaries will lead to a better understanding. This is a new approach which finds its inception in a number of contemporary theories related to both practice theory and ritual communication theory, and suggests that a broad-ranging symbolic-anthropological study and an associated focus on ritual

and the practice of ancestor worship will provide a nuanced and more efficacious paradigm through which Chinese culture may be viewed.

The Chinese cultural world view is both shaped by ancestor worship and the world of the ancestors, and is a source of the conditions which enabled and fostered ancestor worship. In this cultural realm, ancestors, self, and heirs are connected in a web of relationships bounded by harmony, hierarchy and mutual dependence. 'Reverence for ancestors has been part of life for virtually all Chinese, regardless of their involvement with other forms of religion or their beliefs in gods or ghosts' (Jochim 1986, 14) and as 'a factor in moulding Chinese life, [Chinese ancestor worship] can hardly be exaggerated (Latourette 1964, 540).' This thesis will go further than Jochim and Latourette, and claim that that ancestor worship has been a vital part and a significant factor of Chinese culture. Ancestor worship, as the nexus in the web of cultural actions, is also the epistemological key to a better, less ideologically biased, and more nuanced understanding of Chinese culture, offering a more efficacious cultural discourse.

However while the importance of ancestor worship to Chinese culture was well recognized in ancient and classical China, ancestor worship is generally seen by Western contemporary scholarship as being of less importance than it once was, of no importance, or even as a negative. And even if there is some kind of agreement or recognition concerning the importance of ancestor worship in 'traditional Chinese society, if we start asking more particular questions about this fundamental concern of the Chinese mind, we find that comparatively little is known' (Aijmer 1974, 232). As a marker or key to understanding Chinese culture, it is the contention of this thesis that this understanding of ancestor worship is flawed and skewed, and its cultural

significance most often ignored while at the same time the significance of Confucianism is over-promoted.

This thesis will argue that the *Confucianism-as Chinese-culture* paradigm is a kind of orientalism, an Edward Said (1978) type of orientalism, where (negative) views of China (as part of the Orient) were ‘manufactured’ (Jensen 1997) by the attitudes and ideals of the era of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, leading to a misunderstanding of the ‘other’ culture: Chinese culture. This orientalism is a manifestation of the Western-centric paradigm of understanding which includes, according to Said (1993, 90), ‘a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections.’ Said’s radical critique of Western cultural epistemology was not framed in anthropological terms; however it has challenged the most elemental aspects of anthropological authority and its requirement to translate cultural difference into Western terms.

The Western constructed web of cultural reality framed by European centrism is difficult to change, as it has evolved into cultural myth, where contradictory or alternative positions are rarely glimpsed and its hegemonic power unchallenged. So-called orientalism¹ is still a contemporary way of thinking and living, and not just an out-dated way of knowing from the colonial past; it is an integral part of modern Western thought and ideology. The West interprets and assesses Chinese culture with the inherent attitude that its own way of understanding is superior because it is invariably true.

¹ Edward Said explores the biases of the West as it tries to attain a coherent understanding of other cultures. His work is often seen as inceptive of post-colonialism and is also linked with the theories of Michel Foucault, especially in relation to the relationship of discourse and power.

The Chinese themselves have not been immune to this Western inspired way of thinking and, beginning with the intellectual attacks of the May Fourth and the New Cultural movements and culminating in an all-out assault on Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), many of China's leading intellectuals, such as Hu Shi (1891-1962), were convinced that China and its culture was inferior to that of the West. Hu Shi wrote:

There are half-wits...who wish you to believe that the old Chinese culture and moral values are superior to all others. ...I want to say to you, don't be fooled. We must admit...that we are inferior to others not only in technology and political institutions but also in moral values, knowledge, literature, music, fine arts and body physique.

(quoted in Wang 1966, 395)

Western conceptions of China have undergone drastic changes throughout the modern period, and the 'interesting thing is that these changes have not reflected changes in Chinese society [or the view of culture we desire here], as much as changes in [Western] intellectual history' (Dawson 1967, 7).

Thesis goal

It is the goal of this thesis is to overcome to some degree this [Western] epistemological bias and achieve a better, more nuanced understanding of Chinese culture. It is proposed that this less ethno-biased, more culturally-nuanced understanding will be achieved by the investigation and exposition of the role of the practice of ancestor worship and its corollaries in Chinese culture. The proposition of this thesis is that ancestor worship has been a key, both normatively and epistemologically, in Chinese culture, and it has enabled the success of Chinese culture and society over a long period of time - ancestor worship has been its primary

survival strategy. As a strategy, as a deep and underlying current, and as the nexus for cultural *significants*², it underpins Chinese culture.

Despite the urge over the past half century or so by the West and the Western academy in particular to view China's culture through a paradigm loosely framed by Confucianism, some scholars argue that 'the dynamics of Chinese society are still poorly understood' (Parish and Whyte 1978, 248). Parish and Whyte (1978, 249) also note that the

rituals and ceremonies [of ancestor worship] are not important simply because they are a link with the past, but because they celebrate and reinforce core social relationships and values in the present lives of the Chinese people [and] mirror the social world and the concerns of the living.

And it is these core social values and their inherent and vital importance to Chinese culture which are engaged with throughout this thesis. Their 'vital importance' becomes increasingly evident in this thesis as the dominance of the social realm throughout Chinese history is examined.

Thesis structure

The thesis is structured according to the rationale of the argument. It is not a matter of discovering new facts, but about re-arranging what is already known, showing connections, and making a case for this new arrangement as an alternative means for understanding Chinese culture. The underlying theories for this methodology are explained in detail in the first chapter. At the hub of a constellation of theories utilized

² The word *significants* is used here in relation to Clifford Geertz's notion of 'culture' and is a noun which indicates those strands in Geertz's cultural 'webs of significance' – see the account of 'culture' below.

here is practice theory. Practice theory is not a theory in the traditional sense, in that it does not make a set of general claims in order to comprehensively explain a particular phenomenon. 'It is an approach to understanding culture which avoids formal unity and eschews a single over-arching explanatory account' (Springs 2008, 934-969). It is as an argument that primarily concerns itself with what people do, and asks why these practices have been practised, and what were/are the conditions for their existence and what have been/are their implications.

Related to practice theory are a number of antecedent theories and works ranging from Kant to Dilthey to Wittgenstein and Geertz, and in relation to ritual communication, from Dewey to Carey and Rothenbuhler. The practices relating to ancestor worship, that is the rituals of ancestor worship, will be 'thickly' described. 'Thick description', a term used by Clifford Geertz, means to interpret and re-describe socially significant practices, and the norms, values and strategies implicit in these practices. Also important is Geertz's (1973, 5) explanation of culture as 'webs of significance man himself has spun'; and Wittgenstein's ideas concerning language, understanding, and 'form of life', which stress the intertwining of culture, worldview and language. A theory of Chinese ancestor worship is not proffered in this thesis. Instead the thesis points out the connections and correlates. It is a description of ancestor worship and not an explanation by way of theory. This should not be considered as an examination of different things, but only different views of the same thing – ancestor worship and its logical, phenomenal, and epistemic connections with Chinese culture.

Chapter two, “Challenging the dominant discourse: *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture*”, questions the efficacy of Confucianism as the master narrative of Chinese culture. Whereas the remainder and core of the thesis is a positive statement and an extensive presentation of ancestor worship, showing its vital and important connections as the nexus of cultural practice, this chapter counters the orthodox claim of Confucianism as that nexus of action and understanding of Chinese culture. It is not claimed that Confucianism is not an important Chinese cultural heritage, nor is it disputed that Confucianism has a reinforcing role in ancestor worship. The clear aim of this chapter is to show the links between ancestor worship and Confucianism, and the correct place of Confucianism in the landscape of Chinese culture, dominated as it is conceptually by ancestor worship.

For many, Confucianism is the key to understanding Chinese culture and the ‘Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years’ (De Bary 1960, 15). It has become the master narrative for understanding Chinese culture and is the master narrative that this thesis seeks to debunk. I believe, along with Overmeyer (1995, 1), that there has ‘been an over-reliance in the past on [mainly Confucian] philosophical texts for understanding the mentality of early [and later]³ China’. The *Confucian-as-Chinese-culture* discourse suffers from dual drawbacks of problems to do with interpretation, and problems associated with comparison to Western paradigms of understanding and hegemonic discourses, again a problem of interpretation, but one of a different nature. Confucianism imposes unrealistic limits and constraints on an understanding of Chinese culture on the one hand, and on the other it brings with it extraneous concepts and ideas that have no bearing Chinese culture.

³ My brackets. I will argue later and throughout the continuing nature of Chinese culture and therefore Chinese ‘mentality’.

Confucianism is a generic Western term that has no corresponding term in the Chinese languages. When we refer to Chinese society and other societies influenced by China as Confucian societies or as Confucian cultures, the meaning of these terms is so widely disputed that it is of little practical use in attributing cultural value and significance. Not only is the authority and meaning of the so-called Confucian texts disputed but also the meaning of Confucianism itself is disputed among scholars (and generally neglected among the Chinese people). This chapter exposes the ambiguities associated with the term *Confucianism* and asserts that this inadequacy inhibits it as an effective nexus of understanding of Chinese culture.

Confucianism lends itself to a number of disciplinary approaches, such as philosophical, religious, historical, sociological, political and anthropological, providing a narrative of great complexity and also of uncertainty and ambiguity. The outcome is often seen as contradictory, confusing, multi-layered, but always inter-related (Tu 1992, 18). Confucianism may be interpreted in a number of ways, and modern scholarship has provided a vast array of meanings and categories of understanding (Dirlik 1995, 251; Rozman 1991, 160; Tu 1994a, 40), but the question remains unanswered: which one do we choose in relation to understanding Chinese culture?

Also, and of obvious interest (though most often glossed over), is that Confucianism postdates the central and inceptive ideas and themes that constitute Chinese culture, society and traditions. It is generally agreed that to understand Chinese culture and civilization, due to its continuous nature, the process of understanding must begin with China's embryonic beginnings. More than just problems with authenticity though, the Confucian texts also managed, as a source of high culture hegemony, to

remove other forms of textual evidence which offered alternative or different views to those of the literati or *Ru*.

The major epistemological problem for the West in understanding China arises from the determined resolve of the West to impose its ‘transcendental pretense’ (Solomon 1993, 3). Western Enlightenment thinking is dogmatic in that it is dismissive of any other different cultural views – this is its transcendental pretense. Hegel’s universal and absolute idealism as ‘transcendental pretense’ was a form of ideological imperialism which reached absolute proportions (Solomon 1993, 358). *Confucianism* as a master narrative has within it a Western ‘transcendental pretense’, and it is not an understanding within Chinese culture. The Chinese understand their own culture, as the thesis argues throughout, through a variety of deep and inherent norms, rituals and practices related to ancestor worship.

The following four chapters, the heart of the thesis, are an exposition of ancestor worship and its corollaries and show that ancestor worship is complex (when analyzed), and may be seen, described, and understood in many ways. The key function of the ancestors in Chinese culture is not at first apparent. However clarity of their vital function is gradually achieved as the description unfolds. Only through considering all the connections to ancestor worship can the goal of this thesis be achieved. The many views or various descriptions offered amount to an argument of cumulative evidence such as may be found in a court room. The four chapters equate to the total ‘positive’ argument in defense of the thesis.

The chapter, “Watching the Ancestors”, provides not only a description of what ancestor worship is, but also introduces ancestor worship as a practice that has been

ubiquitous throughout Chinese history. Its purpose is to establish a cognitive starting point by exploring the meaning of ancestor worship in all its semantic scope. It provides an introduction to the subject and a provisional work-in-progress meaning both generally and in this thesis, by the term ancestor worship. The term is discussed and the general and stereotypical views of what is meant by this term, which includes its metonyms, synonyms, links and correlations, are examined. The general approach of the chapter is to take a phenomenological look at the Chinese doing ancestor worship: a description of practice. Meaning has been provided by a number of evidential agencies and in the main is an anthropological and historical conception of ancestor worship. However these are not the only academic agencies or disciplines employed; archaeology, philology, philosophy, and religion are also important disciplines in this multi-disciplined work.

Ancestor worship and the traditional Chinese kinship system are presented, initially, in an ahistorical form, as though they are unchanging and permanent. This snapshot rather than the moving picture approach is required at this stage as an aid for conceptual clarity. Of course such a presentation is a distortion in that ancestor worship, like all other traditional and cultural events, was not static but changed as circumstances unfolded. This evolving and changing nature is then addressed throughout the remaining thesis. The archaeological and historical evidence provided will support the proposition that ancestor worship has been practised by the Chinese since the earliest recorded times. It will show that the ancient Chinese of the Shang dynasty, and even earlier, were worshipping and sacrificing to their ancestors, and that this has been important and significant to their society and their culture ever since.

Ancestor worship was not just a practice of the ancient elite or nobility, and ‘it is likely that the ancestors of the majority of the common people of China since those times have needed a considerable amount of attention from their descendants’ (Baker 1979, 72). The exposition shows that there are a number of kinds or types of ancestor worship and various ways in which it may be categorized and understood. There are also many types of ancestors and a variety of ways that the realms that these ancestors inhabited could be understood.

Ancestor worship, though, involves much more than the practice outlined in these phenomenological observations. These symbols, as rites and rituals, contain a socio-political program based upon the values and worldviews inculcated by these practices. The depiction of Chinese ancestor worship in this thesis elucidates the meaning of ancestor worship, especially in its broader context, as well as, most importantly, highlighting the comprehensive and even cosmic nature of ancestor worship as an important cultural symbol over the entire course of Chinese history and culture.

The next chapter shows the significance of ancestor worship as it is expressed in Chinese thought through their philosophy and religion. It deals with the importance of the ancestors in the context of social groups in China and their cultures. Here we begin to see the unique aspects of Chinese culture that are necessarily connected to the worship of ancestors. It is important to note here, as Ann Swidler (2001, 75) does, that while a practice theory approach shifts the sociological focus from conscious, rational ideas and values to the empirical realm of the physical and habitual, the interpretation and meaning of those practices moves to ‘the realm of the subjective.’ It becomes necessary to make ‘implicit claims about what symbol means’ for the culture, ‘but such claims are at least focused on description of a clearly observable empirical object: the ritual treated as *text*.’ The publicly observable symbols and

rituals of ancestor worship become an empirical object, rather than something hidden away in individual consciousness.

The subject of Chinese thought is overwhelmingly human and social, with filial/ancestral piety leading to an emphasis on family extending to the larger social realm and even to the cosmos. The initial focus here is on the ways of thinking of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age Chinese from which the later influential (so-called) Confucian texts and writers drew their own views, values, and teleology. Having provided a phenomenological, snapshot account of ancestor worship in the previous chapter, the focus here is to give an historical perspective on the inception of Chinese thought and culture and its relationship with ancestors worship. It engages with the discourse of Chinese worldview as the primal paradigm and provides not only a historical starting point for the exposition of ancestor worship, but also a logical one.

Found in the rituals surrounding ancestor worship, the evolution of Chinese culture saw the development of certain worldviews which promoted and accepted a number of social ideas and strategies linked to ideas of family, hierarchy, and strength in harmony. Ancestor worship and its correlates together make up a paradigm model for the origination and inspiration of Chinese culture. Ancestor worship highlighted the family and kin relationships, as a model for society. Ancestor worship and ritual also provided the individual and society with a set of values, especially in relation to social unity, such as order, benevolence, harmony and reciprocity. It provided links with the dead and gave rise and force to an ontological reality which supported both the now and the then. Ancestor worship and its corollaries not only ordered the socio-political realm, but also the cosmic.

Ancestor worship eventually provided the grounds for the most enduring social system in world history. It provided the conditions, values, and rationale for the benefits of care and protection provided by families extending to the wider polity, and the sense of durability, order, hierarchy, and harmony within this society. This cultural optimism which understood and reacted to the world, reflected the importance the early Chinese placed on humanity as the centre of all things, on social harmony, and on an aesthetic approach to this human centered world which avoided abstract principles. Within this deep faith, which is perhaps better understood as a deep, inherent, and intrinsic view of the world, we can generally identify this core in terms of the ideals of life which are thought worthy of pursuit and which can be used as standards of value judgments for the larger portion of society. Chinese philosophy eventually developed to conceptualize the ideal aspirations of the people and their means of achieving these aspirations. This philosophy evolved and emerged from the practical activity of life – that is from its culture – and it generated an originative system of thinking which both consciously reflects and normatively guides Chinese culture.

Expressed rather inadequately, but necessarily, in philosophical and religious terms, the cultural strategies of the Chinese, their worldview, ethos, or way of thinking, are shown to be unique. Chinese distinctiveness, its cultural uniqueness, emerges from the complex interaction of way of life and the environment, to produce a Chinese *form of life (Lebensform)*. Using the categories of change, positive and negative (pessimism and optimism), harmony, and vagueness, the difference between the development of Chinese thought and Western thought becomes more apparent. Also made clear is the association of ancestor worship to the Chinese cultural distinctions. A central goal of this chapter is to show the importance of the social role of ancestor

worship and its strategic function in Chinese culture. The connections between the religious, the philosophical, and the biological with the social are introduced as important aspects of this strategy – aspects that will be dealt with at length in the following chapter.

In chapter five, “Living with the Ancestors”, the insights gleaned from the previous chapter are further developed as they help us understand the importance the ancestors in the social realm. This chapter engages with the discourse of the family and filial piety (and veneration as piety). The dominant social strategies and their incumbent social mores which originated in ancestor worship profoundly influenced not only the religious and philosophical views of the Chinese, but also the socio-political orders. The purpose of this chapter is to reinforce and re-emphasize connections. Filial piety confirms the individual, as a member of a larger family-kin-ancestor web, and that web as the conceptual and actual nexus in the *web of significant*s that is Chinese culture. It suggests a unified and dynamic world (view) – a world (view) not requiring a creator God. Its biological connections allow communication across space and time. Analogically, as a cultural connection, it connects the biological with the social and the political.

In a world underpinned by the reverence towards ancestors the individual exists by virtue of his descendents, and his ancestors exist only through him. The importance of the reciprocity of kinship values may be seen very clearly in Chinese family relationships, and in the phenomena of these relationships writ-large in the politico-social realm. The sense of mutual responsibility between parents and son was central to the operation of the family as a continuing and strong unit, and conversely

important for the operation of the state. One of the more particularly significant aspects of Chinese civilization has been its ability to maintain a highly organized, complex society over vast stretches of time and space.

The political hegemony (and here we include also the social) in Chinese society and its dominance over the military, religious, and economic institutions is one of China's most remarkable characteristics. This political hegemony, sanctioned by the importance of the family values extended to the political, left no room for growth of those other institutions which have historically had various roles as the hegemonic force par excellence, in other civilizations, whether military, religious or economic forces. This is notably an exemplar instance of cultural difference. The connecting line here between worldview and ancestor worship, values and strategies, family and *xiao*, and political dominance by the ruler, is most evident. The political realm depended on the social realm and the system of family and ancestor worship, subsuming the military, religious and economic realms and functions. Filial piety 'involves what is markedly Chinese' (Isay 2005, 441) and is at the very heart of Chinese culture' (Holzman 1998, 199). Therefore, as filial piety is a cultural correlate of ancestor worship, each depending on the other for conceptual existence, ancestor worship may also be seen as what is 'markedly Chinese' and 'at the very heart of Chinese culture'.

Having established the ubiquity and importance of the rituals of ancestor worship in Chinese culture, the question of why these rituals have been the chosen means for communicating cultural values and strategies is engaged here in the next chapter, "Ritual and Ancestor Worship". This analysis of ritual in Chinese culture and history

discusses why ancestor worship, as a ritual, is more efficacious in understanding Chinese culture than the master narrative of Confucianism. It also shows the links between ancestor worship and Confucianism, and the place of Confucianism in the landscape of Chinese culture. It exposes the importance of ritual in Chinese culture and its co-relationship with a concern for the ancestors. It engages the topic in a number of ways. It analyses ritual as it is popularly portrayed as a general concern of the Chinese; ritual as communication; *li* as the Chinese word that is most often translated as ritual; and *li* in its (expanded) cultural, cosmic and metaphysical modes. An analysis of Chinese ritual shows that the Chinese tradition of rituals provides access to various layers and significant aspects of Chinese culture in ways that are inaccessible to a 'semiotic' analysis via language alone. Rituals and ritual have always been central to Chinese culture (Yang 1967, 44), and they are central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture.

Thus under Duke Chou 25th year we read: Ritual (*li*) is the constant principle of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the proper action of mankind.... Ritual determines the relations of high and low; it is the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth and that by which the people live. (*Tso Chuan* in Watson 1971, 44)

The underlying questions of this chapter ask why ritual is so important. Why has ritual been such an important aspect of Chinese culture from ancient times and why has ritual played such a vital role in Chinese culture? What is the significance of rituals concerning the relationships between the living and the dead – from worldview to human and social values – from these values to the means and ways of living those values? The rituals involved in ancestor worship, and indeed any ritual, may be

considered from many viewpoints. Ritual, as communication, is a powerful and a most effective form of cultural communication. From a sociological-religious point of view it is an element of the serious life. All cultures utilize ritual as a symbolic means of maintenance, and for adapting to outside influences.

Finally, in the last chapter, the preceding chapters are summarized and the consequences of a changed paradigm are discussed. In order to rectify and overcome the epistemological problematic, I have proposed a new approach to the understanding of China and Chinese culture. It is an approach which embodies an argument that primarily concerns itself with what people do: their shared practices.

This thesis argues that the important, ever-present, and continuous cultural symbols and rituals, those *significants* which have been spoken of and engaged throughout the thesis, cannot easily be removed and eradicated over a relatively short time of even a century. Chinese culture, as a continuous entity, has overcome many vicissitudes over its long (five millennia or more) history and the confrontation with what we call modernity is yet just another encounter along the way. While the importance of the ancestors may have been arrested, back-grounded, or seemingly negated during much of the past century of change, it is in fact only a temporary hiatus, and as circumstances change and become more favorable, it will become more energized, more openly practised and praised, and more acceptable. The practice of ancestor worship, in traditional and neo-traditional modes, is on the increase, and becoming more generally accepted, as a correlation of the increased social self esteem of the Chinese, and as a consequence of the debates concerning Chinese identity and direction.

Our contemporary understanding of Chinese culture is only interesting and worthwhile in light of future consequences, and so, while briefly summarizing the thesis argument and providing an account of current ancestral practices in China, the emphasis here is on the consequences of such an understanding. That is, what difference does it make if Chinese culture is understood differently, for after all the difference is one of nuance, given that there is much overlap between the two paradigms? In concrete terms, and in relation to this thesis, it means re-assessing some of the important *significants* (ideals, values, strategies) of our own Western culture, not for the sake of understanding ourselves better, (although this is a valid and worthwhile endeavor), but in order to adjust our own historical mind, in order to re-look at and re-assess if required, our views of China.

In this last section I am concerned with applying some of the insights gained from the preceding view of Chinese culture, and asking what are their consequences, if any, in today's world. Having interpreted the culture and history of the people from Neolithic times by a methodological focus on the actual cultural practices, and recognizing culture (once again) as that constructed *web of significants* man has spun for himself as a means of governing social behavior, we can now look at and compare some of those *significants* and consider their possible outcomes. By that I mean a range of behavior patterns that impact on the political, the economic, the social, or any other subjects of significance.

The real significance of understanding China through ancestor worship lies in its avoidance of the problems encountered in the conventional *Confucianism-as-Chinese culture* master narrative, as it avoids many negative comparisons between Confucianism and Western philosophy, ethics, social ideals and so on. It overcomes

the absurd situation where ‘all texts on Chinese history mention its long continuity, a remarkable case in world record, [but they do so] usually without elaboration’ (Liu and Tu 1970, 10).

A full understanding of the import of the connections between reverence for the ancestors and the socio-political realm in China and its total significance to Chinese culture sets in place a rationale that questions many of the standard Western conclusions about contemporary China. This rationale, free from the restrictions of the *Confucianism-as-Chinese culture* discourse and its ideological biased paradigm which prohibits an eyes-wide-opened view, allows an analysis of Chinese culture which appreciates its unique features, its longevity, and its strength.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Underpinnings - Rationale and Method

1:1: Thesis aim, method, rationale, and a new approach

This thesis provides a new and alternative approach to the understanding of Chinese culture. The aim is to provide a comprehensive exposition of Chinese ancestor worship, and to show by dint of argument, the validity of the proposition that ancestor worship as a continuing cultural symbol and ritual activity provides an efficacious means for understanding Chinese culture. This aim will be achieved by reviewing scholarly texts and by selecting and collating appropriate evidence, both historical and contemporary, from the limited studies in this area, and also from general works on China. This textual evidence is not confined or limited to those disciplines which directly relate to the subject matter, such as Chinese history, philosophy, anthropology, philology, or sociology. It is a trans-disciplinary investigation into Chinese ancestor worship and its corollaries, which shows the importance of these connections between Chinese ancestor worship and Chinese culture. By trans-disciplinary I refer to the term introduced by Piaget (1970) which concerns those studies which are simultaneously between disciplines, across disciplines yet beyond any discipline. That is not to say it rejects any rigor or reason, rather it seeks a unity of knowledge. K. C. Chang (1983, xx) tells us that ‘the study of the ancient [and long lasting] Chinese civilization can be most rewarding if it de-emphasises traditional disciplinary barriers’, and it is rewarding, I would suggest, because it achieves a better outcome.

The thesis will provide an overview of, and shed light upon, Chinese ancestor worship and its significance in Chinese culture, not by discovery, but ‘by arranging what is already known in a way which clarifies the links or interconnections’ (Glock 1996, 279). The true task of philosophy, and by analogy, of cultural analysis, is not to explain or deduce anything, only to describe it. Such an investigation ‘puts everything before us’, and by doing so, ‘leaves everything as it is’ (Wittgenstein 2003, §126, 124). ‘The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes)’ (§129).

This clear view, (clearer than the view delivered by a Confucian paradigm), will show an ordered Chinese *weltanschauung* or worldview by presenting the connections to Chinese ancestor worship; connections such as the grammatical connections with ancestral veneration, ancestral piety and filial piety; filial piety’s connections with family, society and the broader polity and the socio-political hegemony; and the connections with culture, ritual and *li*. Bourdieu (1990, 87-8) comes to a similar conclusion, although he does not refer to ‘connections’, but to ‘different relationships’ and to ‘terms it links’:

Ritual practice performs an uncertain abstraction which brings the same symbol into different relationships by apprehending it through different aspects...This mode of apprehension never explicitly limits itself to any one aspect of the terms it links, but takes each one, each time, as a whole.

The requirement to apprehend the cultural understanding of the rituals of ancestor worship ‘through different aspects’ is the motivation behind the plurality of methodology and discipline employed by this thesis. This multi-vocal, yet necessarily inconsistent approach may be compared analogously to the judicial situation where the ‘defense’ seeks evidence from a broad range of witnesses and employs various argumentative strategies in order to ‘make a case’ for its own view.

However, before arriving at a perspicuous view of ancestor worship, which itself goes a long way to addressing the aims of this thesis, the thesis must challenge and deconstruct the concept of *Confucianism-as-(the key to understanding)-Chinese-culture* and to displace the importance it is now endowed with in most scholarship concerning this subject generally. By gradually debunking the case for Confucianism as the key narrative of Chinese culture, this investigation of Confucianism will add to the argument in favour of ancestor worship as the cultural symbol around which the narrative is re-built. It will also challenge those mostly Western ideas that fail to see the import of what we can call at this early stage of our discourse a non-discursive, non-rational understanding in the form of symbol and action (ritual), e.g., ancestor worship. In doing so it is also concerned with the contiguity, significance, and relevance of ancestor worship to an understanding of Chinese culture today.

Having cleared the cognitive space for a more considered understanding of Chinese culture vis-à-vis ancestor worship, the thesis will conclude by reinforcing this understanding through a discussion of the relevance of ancestor worship and a culture imbued and rooted in ancestor worship to today’s world and to today’s Western world view. Making use of much contemporary theory such as practice theory, hermeneutics, communication and ritual theory, learning and cultural theories, and

literary theory, the thesis adds weight, and makes interesting, the findings and outcomes made clear throughout by the perspicuous representation of ancestor worship and the negation of Confucianism as the master narrative. An important consequence of this part of the cross-cultural enterprise is the better understanding acquired, not only of China, but of self, and self as ‘our Western culture’.

In the process of achieving its goals, this thesis will aim to find complexity in the assumed-but-not-simple rituals surrounding ancestor worship, while at the same time seeing the complexity of connections between ancestor worship and its correlates as a unified cultural symbol and as a simplified and generalized concept useful for communication. It is a Wittgensteinian kind of understanding that comes from seeing the particular concrete case in the right light (2003, §133) and therefore is not a kind of theory or a set of positive claims that can logically show, like a mathematical equation, that the thesis is true, but the understanding which comes about by seeing connections to what we already know. If it is considered a theory at all, given the connotation between theory and thesis, theory here means simply a ‘general and abstract account’ (Schatzki 2001, 3) of ancestor worship as a key interpretive symbol of Chinese culture.

As an investigation, the thesis attempts to throw light upon the question: what are the purposes or reasons that brought ancestor worship (and ritual) into its privileged being, and enabled its significant continuation? ‘Hermeneutics is primary to this process of disclosure in that the reasons are not *mere facts* but rather the meaning of social events’ (Ulin 2001, 118), and it is the meaning of ancestor worship and its relationship to Chinese culture that concerns this thesis.

The hermeneutic approach also has a corresponding relationship to the ancient Chinese understanding of the world. This correspondence is not considered necessary but as an additional benefit. Cross-cultural understanding is not about abstract notions, but about concrete examples in history. ‘As the Qing scholar and historian Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801) remarks, “The ancients never spoke of principles detached from particular things”’ (Zhang 1998, 6-7). It is our pre-judged cultural anticipations which allow us to understand and interpret the products and practices of other cultures, and it is these same prejudgments which draw us into the hermeneutic circle. Our prejudices (our prejudged positions vis-à-vis our worldview) are not postponed nor are they rigorously adhered to, but are instead gradually changed through the dialectical movement of understanding of the relationship of part to whole. The meaning of Chinese ancestor worship and its significance to an overall understanding of Chinese culture will disclose itself through this dialectical process. Chinese ancestor worship is a symbol, and it is the symbol, ‘which is [for Ricoeur]⁴ the privileged object of hermeneutics’ and which has ‘unfathomable depth and opacity’ as it is grounded in life and only ‘partially reflected in language’ (Ulin 2001, 120).

An essential characteristic of contemporary epistemology is the holistic character of knowledge: ‘knowledge is not a single item existing by itself but a system of interrelated, interlocking concepts, theories and experiences’ (Cheng 2003, 560). As a whole and a totality a text or text analogue is not just a simple succession of words and sentences. The relationship between the whole and the parts of a text requires an explicit type of ‘judgment’ (Ricoeur 1971, 548; Ulin 2001, 129) where the act of

4

My brackets

judging or interpreting tries to apprehend a sense of the whole. It is hermeneutical in the sense that the whole (of culture) we seek informs the parts, and the parts the whole.

This does not mean that the process of understanding or interpretation of a cultural narrative is uncertain and unpredictable. A cultural narrative is open to many views and readings; however a better interpretation does not involve measuring or verification of an interpretation against the facts. Interpretation of culture by others leads to a variety of other views where the correctness of these views is open to a process of rational argument like that which may be found in the judicial system. My aim in this thesis is to show that the proffered interpretation is more valid and probable in the light of what is known and shown, rather than to provide a true conclusion where a set of premises is set forth from which a verifiable conclusion may be necessarily drawn. It is more inductive than deductive and infers a general statement from a class of specific instances. Validation is not the same as the positivistic claims of verification. Following the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962), ‘scientific procedure suddenly seemed to lose its foundations that rested on systems of logical reasoning and the application of correct methodologies of empirical research’ (Nencel and Pels 1991, 5). Combined with the insight of critical theory, the *Khunian break* provides the conditions under which the supposed neutrality of theory and method can be revealed as Western ideology.

Not all interpretations are equal, and just as Paul Ricoeur (1971, 549) argues that ‘validation is an argumentative discipline’, and compares it to the legal interpretation and argumentation of the legal system, it is my task here in this thesis, to convince the

‘jury’ that my interpretation is the more preferred one, and, just as one might expect in a court case, I will present throughout a case for consideration based upon the presentation of evidence and argument. ‘The process of argumentation can and should strive towards achieving a preferred interpretation’ (Ulin 2001, 129), preferred in this case of ancestor worship, for epistemologically sound reasons.

The conventionally accepted dominant discourse and paradigmatic view of Chinese culture has claimed its authority via the Chinese classics, especially the Confucian canon. However, current scholarship and practice are now starting to question this view. The epistemological inquisitiveness of this thesis, is, in part, a post-modern suspicion ‘which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge’ inherent within ‘modern’ thought (Eagleton 2004, 13). This suspicion is underpinned by the doubts of the French philosophers Foucault and Lyotard who openly criticize any views that there could be a meta-narrative and underlying meta-theory ‘through which all things can be connected or represented’ and an ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ (Harvey 1989, 45).

When textual evidence lost its credibility and was seen merely as a recording device, it became clear that writing and text was only a form of interpretation and there were other forms of interpretation that needed to be considered. While texts (words and sentences) may help point to the truth, they should never be mistaken for the thing itself. The early Chinese thinker Chuang Tzu realized the shortcomings of words:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget about the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the

rabbit you can forget about the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (*Chuang Tzu* in Watson, 1968, 320)

Chuang Tzu was 'avoiding the trap of fixed doctrinal truths' (Jochim 1986, 183); fixed and supposedly verifiable truths where words and text are accurate representations of reality and truth. Throughout much of the early Daoist writings there is a sustained suspicion of language. 'A major theme of the *Daodejing* is that an uncritical use of language can lull us into a distorted understanding of the nature of the world in which we live' (Hall and Ames 2004, 112). Where the Logicians and so-called logical thought 'sought to pin down the meaning of words, Chuang Tzu seeks to lift men's minds to a plane which is above such petty and fallacious concepts.' For him, the accepted divisions between 'good and bad, and [between] right and wrong, are based upon narrow and purely relative viewpoints' (Watson 1968, 161).

It is also this requirement for a verifiable and truthful state of affairs which leads to a 'distorted understanding of the nature of the world' that the hermeneutical approach and practice theory employed here also tries to avoid. There are two approaches to understanding culture/s (Nathan 1993, 324); hermeneutic and positivistic. This thesis takes a hermeneutic approach to culture, recognizing Chinese culture's historical framework, its inherently social characteristics, and its symbolic nature leading to necessarily conceptual understanding. The interpretation of these concepts is the attempt to make clear the meaning of historical and social symbols and actions such as in the Chinese case, ritual and especially the rituals pertaining to worship or reverence of the ancestors. This search for meaning is more than a phenomenological description, and requires the search for the deep, opaque, and unfathomable meaning

of and reason for ancestor worship. The understanding is to be found in culture's 'pattern of meanings' (Geertz 1973), or by understandingly entering what Benjamin Schwartz (1985) calls its 'world of thought' to explore the '*problematique*' of its thinkers and discover their 'shared cultural assumptions'.

Hermeneutics has played an influential role in contemporary anthropological theory and its role within this thesis is just as important. The hermeneutic approach of this thesis has with it an attitude that any attempt at an objective reconstruction or representation is not useful. As subjects of thought and action, we all 'live in a world that science has so successfully managed to understand.' We 'have a very particular perspective on the world', a subjective perspective (Avramides 2005, 227). However we are also capable of transcending this subjective perspective and of thinking about the world in a detached manner. According to Thomas Nagel (1986, 3), both perspectives, subjective and objective, are real and the truth about our world can only be gained through an understanding of how these two perspectives coexist in all that we think and do. Furthermore, it is the relationship between these two perspectives which 'amount to a world view.'

Understanding has become the cornerstone of hermeneutic theory (Mueller-Vollmer 1985, 9). As a way of knowing, its roots may be found in the process of human life itself; it is a category or form of life, a *Lebensform*. This term, as employed by Wittgenstein, 'stresses the intertwining of culture, world view and language...It is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady forms of life, regular activity [ritual]' (Glock 1996, 124).

Dilthey maintains that in their daily lives human beings find themselves in situations in which they have to understand what is happening around them so that they may act

or react accordingly. Thus, their actual behaviour reflects their lived understanding and comprehension of their social and cultural environment. (Mueller- Vollmer 1985, 25)

The cultural understanding we seek starts with a presumption of deficiency in relation to how China is presently understood, and that a better understanding of China is possible using the approach outlined here. This thesis will show that the general and contemporary understanding of China ranges from a nuanced misunderstanding to an erroneous and biased view. The understanding that is sought is not the only, nor the correct understanding, but it is a better understanding than is conventionally available. The thesis approaches the subject with a non-positivistic attitude, eschewing the categories and discourse of *reality* and *truth*, realizing their culturally laden significances, and drawing attention to another more nuanced and less culturally biased positions for viewing Chinese culture. The position is informed by a cluster of theories, disciplines and an approach which is underpinned by a combination of various theories. In sufficiently simple and necessarily concise terms, it combines selected theories concerned with practice theory, symbolic anthropology, and ritual communication to achieve its aims. And the practice, the symbol, the ritual chosen is ancestor worship. This approach to an understanding of Chinese culture is new precisely because, as yet, no one has painted the whole canvas of Chinese culture by using the brush of ancestor worship.

1:2: Theoretical underpinnings

It may be pertinent to note here that the theories that underpin this thesis are not inceptive of the thesis. I did not attempt this thesis by following a particular theory or theories. In fact the words of Bourdieu below succinctly express the place of theory in my own work:

Let me say outright and very forcefully that I never ‘theorize’, if by that we mean engage in the kind of gobbledegook...that is good for textbooks and which...passes for Theory in much of Anglo-American social science...There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better, a set of *thinking tools* visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such. (Wacquant 1989, 50)

The impetus for this thesis was in fact no more than my own disenchantment with the Confucian-philosophical mode of understanding Chinese culture that was presented to me by Charles A. Moore in his book, *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, a 1967 product of the 1967 ‘Philosophers East-West’ conference in Hawaii which also produced the texts *The Japanese Mind* and *The Indian Mind*. However, one step removed from my own initial impetus concerning how Chinese culture is viewed, are a congeries of other views, and in the initial stages of developing the ideas and strategies for this thesis, the more important theoretical approaches which influenced me were those of practice theory within symbolic and cultural anthropology, the anthropological insights as enunciated in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, and also the (connected) works relating to ritual and communication, especially those of James Carey and Eric W. Rothenbuhler. My instinct was, similar to the postmodern urge of skepticism toward meta-narrative, to be skeptical, at least in the first instance, of approaches to cultural understanding which privileged a master narrative such as any religious or leading philosophical doctrine. This is not an unusual position and a suspicion or skepticism towards text, writing, and even words has been expressed by many authoritative thinkers over the ages. Donald Lopez Jr., in *Elaborations on Emptiness*, a hermeneutical study of a major Buddhist text, the *Heart Sutra*, gives an account of many of these early thinkers and ways of thinking. Besides the early Chinese writers mentioned above, he refers to the skepticism of early Greek and Indian writers and philosophers.

1:2:1: Practice theory, symbolic anthropology, and ritual significance.

Practice theory appeared at the end of the 20th century as an alternative approach towards cultural analysis and cultural comparison. Practice theory 'is a general theory of the production of social subjects through practice in the world, and the production of the world itself through practice' (Ortner 2006, 16). Practice theory does not propose a theory as such, in that it does not organize or systematize data or scientific generalizations that provide comprehensive explanations about the phenomena in question. Nor does it bow to the burden of a particular kind of argument or logic.

Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician. This has to be acknowledged in order to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to writing incoherencies out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it.

(Bourdieu 1990, 86)

Anthropologists and sociologists have for a long time referred to 'shared practices'; however in more recent times, in the final decades of the 20th century, these references have become more important. In some cases a practice approach to understanding culture have become extreme and as far as some researches are concerned '*practice* is all there is to study and describe' (Barnes 2001, 17).

Cross-cultural study is often seen as equivalent to identifying what members of that culture have in common and compare this with members of other cultures. One way to understand what they have in common is to study their shared theories, ideas, beliefs or abstractly specified rules or norms that allegedly 'govern' their behaviour. In relation to understanding Chinese culture this has been the preferred way by the

West, and these ‘shared theories, ideas, beliefs or abstractly specified rules or norms’ have manifested as Confucianism. The difficulty with this rationalistic approach is that these ideas etc. are conceived as being internal to individuals leading to doubt about the verifiability of this kind of approach. A practice approach however, insists that it is within the shared and observable practices of cultural members where the foundation of commonality (and difference) may be found and confidently studied. It is now generally recognized that a practice approach is ‘more satisfactory empirically ...and in particular with [its] implied reaction against idealism’ (Barnes 2001. 17, 18).

Practice theory refers to an approach to cultural understanding that lacks a formal unity, and avoids a single over-arching explanatory account. It is an argument that gives priority to what people do. Within a practice theory approach there is an understanding that although human action is constrained by culture or the social structure, ‘human action [also] makes “structure”—reproduces or transforms it, or both’ (Ortner 1996, 2). This notion of cultural constraint was also important for the ancient Chinese thinker Xunzi and is also a pivotal idea within the ritual communication theories employed later in the thesis as explained below.

The thesis faces the epistemic challenge of how to better understand China by studying *not* what may be said by some, but (initially) what is done by many, and in that sense it may be considered more a cultural approach. It is more an approach used to understanding culture than a theory of culture. It is mainly concerned with important cultural practices and the reasons behind their cultural importance. That is, it aims to understand the important things which have become symbolic and ritualized over time – to study what people do, or did, and therefore to study of the rituals of

China, those especially associated with the worship of the ancestors- thereby attempting to provide a better and more nuanced understanding of Chinese culture and China.

Underpinning much of practice theory are the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein. These include his ideas and notions of family resemblance; meaning as a social practice; language games as a model for cultural practices; and an open understanding of forms of life (Springs 2008). His work provides important resources for cultural analysis. A Wittgensteinian understanding of practice theory comes together with, and sheds light on Clifford Geertz's account of significant cultural practices, meaning (of cultural practice), and thick description (of culture). For Wittgenstein, and for this thesis, the true task of philosophy and therefore of cultural analysis, is not to explain or deduce anything, but only to describe it. An inquiry such as this 'puts everything before us' yet 'leaves everything as it is' (Phillips 2001, 167; Wittgenstein 2003, §124,126). However it is in Wittgenstein's account of rule-following where the elemental problem cultural epistemological problem between the relation of theory and practice is confronted (Bloor 2001, 95-96).

Conventional Western (Enlightenment) thinking, as rationalism, gives priority to theory over practice, and the paradigm example of rationalism is rule-following. Wittgenstein turned this paradigm case of rule-following from being a representation of the priority of theory over practice into an example of the priority of practice over theory. Rule-following looks like a case where theory has clear priority over practice, and when we think about the compulsion of rules, e.g., the rules of arithmetic, we may be inclined to say, 'The meaning of the rule fixes what we have to do' (Bloor 2001,

95-96). When we follow rules we act as we do because of our form-of-life and simply because we have been trained to act this way. Our form-of-life provides the bedrock for our understanding; our practice has priority over theory.

Along with other ‘practice theorists,’ my approach here avoids the fixation towards scientific explanation, the Cartesian fixation with rational certainty and the positivist’s desire for empirical verifiability as the final arbiter for understanding (although desirable it is not the *final* arbiter). This thesis does not recognize any single articulation of truth and reality, as all are only judgments which are able to be amended and improved as further information and experience is available to the knower of truth and reality. This approach to understanding is a sign of particular consideration to practice and practice theory as it privileges a belief that philosophical justification and explanation of what people believe and do is derived from their actions in daily life, and, of course, the action that most concerns this thesis is ancestor worship.

Clifford Geertz has been a significant contributor towards the underlying (authority of) practice theory here. His own anthropological authority was grounded in interpreting cultural differences by describing indigenous symbolic systems – this he labeled ‘thick description’. This is a hermeneutic process which describes and re-describes cultural practice. The fundamental position of thick description is to ‘interpretively discern and conceptually re-describe [significant] socially instituted practices, and the norms implicit in those practices’ (Springs 2008). Geertz’s work comes within the sub-discipline of symbolic anthropology, where the symbols and rituals ‘by which humans assign meanings to these symbols in order to address

fundamental questions about human social life' (Spencer 1996, 535) are studied and interpreted. Symbol here is a trope for a constituent part of cultural practice, the rituals of ancestor worship. These cultural (social) practices are seen as the shared interpretations of a particular group, the Chinese, and their world view as the base for their shared cultural system of meaning (Des Chene 1996, 1274).

The approach by symbolic anthropology is interpretive and this approach is congruent to my own, as I am after all seeking what the Chinese themselves interpret from ancestor worship. Ancestor worship as a symbol brings about social action and is like other such symbols which, as Turner (1967, 36) writes, are 'determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action'. My own concept of culture, which resonates strongly with that of symbolic anthropology, is that it is an independent system of meaning that may be understood by interpreting key symbols and rituals. The motives, views, plans, strategies and beliefs which underpin these cultural symbols such as ancestor worship are initially hard to understand, and may seem impervious to logic. However, when studied as part of a meaningful cultural system, their logic becomes open to view. In his 1950-1954 study of Ndembu culture, Victor Turner (1995, 8-9) clarifies the point when he says that [what he was seeing]:

became fully intelligible only in the light of values embodied and expressed in symbols at ritual performances... and with my eyes wide opened to the importance of ritual...I began to perceive many aspects of Ndembu culture that had been previously invisible to us because of our theoretical blinkers.

Later, Monica Wilson (1957, 6) was to write that 'any analysis not based on some translation of the symbols used by people of that culture is open to suspicion'. Social

actions are guided by symbolic interpretation, and symbolic anthropologists, besides studying obvious symbols and rituals, such as those used in significant religious actions, also study other forms of social organization that at first do not appear to be very symbolic, such as kinship and political organization, which make up a considerable part of this study. The study of these other aspects of society allows us to investigate the role of ancestor worship as a cultural symbol in the everyday life of the Chinese. This multi-aspect, trans-disciplinary approach allows us to examine symbols from different aspects of social life, rather than from one aspect at a time isolated from the rest, and to show that a central idea expressed as a symbol manifests itself in different aspects of culture (Des Chene 1996, 1274).

The cultural symbols or practices that are of central concern to this thesis are the rituals of ancestor worship. The concern with ritual is more than just as a cultural symbol per se.

In the last twenty years a number of diverse fields have found ritual to be an important focus for new forms of cultural analysis. Besides anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion, there are sociobiologists, philosophers, and intellectual historians who have turned to ritual as a “window” on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their world. The result has been a relatively broad and interdisciplinary conversation known as “ritual studies” (Bell 1992, 3).

Ritual is also communication, and as communication, it is a powerful and most effective form of cultural communication. From a sociological-religious point of view it is an element of the serious life. All cultures utilize ritual as a symbolic means of maintenance, and for adapting to outside influences. John Dewey (1966, 5-6) reminds us of the connections between community, commonality, and communication, and

James W. Carey (1990) shows us these connections in light of ritual communication. In order to be considered as a community and to have a culture, certain things must be shared in common, and these are: 'aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge – a common understanding – likemindedness, as sociologists say....Consensus demands communication'. Monica Wilson (1954, 241) appreciated the value of cultural understanding via ritual when she stated that:

Rituals reveal values at their deepest level ... men express in ritual what moves them the most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.

The ritual view of communication focuses on original, socially significant meaning and the preservation of society in time. Transmission accentuates power and control, whereas ritual accentuates social participation and culture (Rothenbuhler 1998, 123). An understanding of communication as culture, and a ritual view of communication, implies that culture defines and maintains itself through ritual. Culture is not a top-down process, a process dominated by the social and political elite, but a complex process of ritualization leading to collaboration and community. Any over-simplified control-command or progress model of society and cultural communication hides the complex normative way power works within a cultural milieu. The rationale of correlations is: ancestor worship – ritual – communication – culture.

1:2:2: Culture

The overriding task of this thesis is to better understand China; to establish a nexus of understanding. There is an explicit emphasis upon the defining importance of culture as the vehicle for this better understanding. Cross-cultural studies involve us in the invention of an idea of cultures, other peoples and our own (Blair 1993, 2). The underlying assumption of this thesis of 'better cultural understanding', which leads to the methodological approach employed, is that to understand other cultures is necessarily a difficult proposition, 'hardy work', in the words of Evans-Pritchard (1965, 109), where 'it is all too easy ... to transplant [the other] thought into our own, to transplant our thought into theirs.' To overcome much of this cross-cultural difficulty, a wide-ranging, practice and symbolic method, ('hardy work'), has been employed.

As is evident, the notion of culture plays a pivotal role in this treatise, and so the problematic concerning its meaning and use here must be addressed. Anthropologist Roy Wagner (1981, 10) remarks that cross- cultural studies involve us in the invention of an idea of cultures. 'Anthropology is the study of man "as if" there were culture. It is brought into being by the invention of culture, both in the general sense, as a concept, and in the specific sense, through the invention of particular cultures.' We live in a world of cultural constructs and regardless of the ethnocentric and fundamentalist Western discourse concerning other cultures, attentiveness to the differences between Western and Chinese culture reinforces the constructed and re-interpreted nature of culture as a phenomena created by humans.

Symbolic anthropology focuses largely on culture as a whole rather than on specific aspects of culture that are isolated from one another. This *culture as a whole* meaning

of culture is not the common sense every-day meaning of culture. We cannot comprehensively, fundamentally, scientifically, and positively say what culture is as the language, thoughts and concepts used to define it are essentially cultural themselves. However we can say what meaning is employed here in this thesis. The ‘agreed original definition of culture within anthropology’ (Jenks 2005, 32) was provided by Edward Burnett Tylor:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1958, 1)

The understanding of culture, as it used and understood here, follows closely that of Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1963, 181). Culture is made up of patterns of behaviour which are transmitted by symbols. They reflect important and distinctive community outcomes and strategies, ‘including their embodiments in artifact’ and ritual. The heart of a culture consists of historically derived and selected ideas and their attached values coming together as a world view. Culture is both a product of action and practice and a condition of further action (Jenks 2005, 36).

The *pattern* (of behaviour) *theory* of culture employed here argues that the continuous and more general elements of culture may be studied apart from social structure. It advocates an inquiry as to ‘how patterns of art, religion, philosophy, as well as technology and science, waxed and waned, acquired their characteristic content and kept rolling majestically along, quite independently of particular individuals’ (Harris 1968, 328). The abstract concept of pattern enables me to attend to the commonality of all elements of culture, while also attending to their particularity in terms of their continuity and complexity. I believe, along with Max Weber and Clifford Geertz (1973, 5) ‘that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has

spun,’ and I also ‘take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning’. For Clifford Geertz, anthropological authority was founded on the capacity to read and reproduce cultural differences by describing indigenous symbolic systems. The ‘webs of significance’ are the object of this study – and it is convenient to generalize this as culture and it is also important to recognize culture in this expanded role. The implication of this understanding of the concept ‘culture’ is that world views become the ultimate cultural artifacts. But although they are in a sense, and in part, products of a culture, they are also, in another sense, producers, or at least the conditions which make possible that culture – there is a circular dynamic at work here.

The cultural webs of significance, I call these *significants*, are the (categorized) means, whether they are seen as ‘plans, recipes, rules, or instructions’ (Geertz 1973, 44), for the regulation and control of behavior and are not seen as the behavior itself. According to one ancient Chinese sage, Xunzi (c. 298-238 BC), man needs these controls (‘plans, recipes, rules, or instructions’), for if allowed to go undirected, man’s behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Spradley and McCurdy (1987, 4) appear to confirm Xunzi’s 2,300 year old insight when they write that: ‘Human beings cope with their natural and social environment by means of their traditional knowledge’ [their culture]. Culture concerns itself with the vital problems of resource distribution, how the ‘collective’ is organized, and how the individual engages with the collective.

A cultural narrative, as I have indicated above, is open to many views and readings. This thesis is a ‘cross-cultural’ endeavour and is different in style, method and

intention from other expressions. It is not about abstract notions, but about concrete examples in history. Cross-cultural study is often seen as equivalent to identifying what members of that culture have in common and comparing this with members of other cultures. Underpinning cross-cultural inquiry, as it is used here, is the idea that there are two forms of culture: the culture that an outside observer may discern, and the culture that is understood by members of that culture; the emic/etic problematic.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1-2) in his *Outline of Theory and Practice* explains how there is a need to transcend both the subjective categories of native experience as well as the objective categories of the outside observer. The practice approach utilized here is meant to overcome this problematic and to indicate ‘a dialectic of the material and symbolic, the real and the perceived, the structure and the act (Bell 1992, 76).’

The emic/etic problematic is exemplified when, for instance, some ritual activities, such as the rituals of ancestor worship, although an integral part of daily life in late imperial China, are rarely mentioned as important cultural signifiers by Chinese intellectuals, yet they have been of enormous interest to many Western interpreters of Chinese culture. On the other hand, the abstract notion of *Chineseness* has been a most important question for the Chinese intelligentsia over the past century and the discourse has been very strong over recent decades. This discourse is most often about ethnic and political questions and concerns the ongoing question of Chinese identity. It is the ‘other’ cultural discourse; the internal Chinese discourse about their own ‘culture’, and while it shares many areas of similarity with the cross-cultural concerns of this work, it nonetheless has its own concerns and its own ideas about the construct ‘culture’ as it overlaps between the two discourses. Nevertheless a brief mention the *Chineseness* discourse is valuable here as it will by comparison make clearer the specific construct of culture employed in this thesis.

There is an “ongoing crisis of ‘identification’ which has so deeply coloured intellectual discourse in China during the twentieth century, and which, to this very day, is expressed with an intensity no less than that of the May Fourth era of seventy years ago.” (Cohen 1991, 133)

Allen Chun (1996 111) reminds us of this discourse when he asks: “what is so unambiguous about China that makes it an unquestioned object of gazing? What is the nature of Chineseness, and who are the Chinese? Finally, who is really speaking here? Something called “China” unquestionably exists, but, more importantly, there is a multitude of expressions to denote different aspects of China and *Chineseness*.”

In the Chinese world, cultural discourse constitutes an appropriate “space of dispersion,” in Michel Foucault's terms, for understanding how ethnicity (as nationality) is constructed. (Chun 1996, 11)

Besides situating the discourse in ethnic and political space, Allen Chun (1996, 116,130) sees a ‘semantic arbitrariness of culture’ and the ‘possibility of different interpretations and political uses of *Chineseness*.’ For Helen Siu (1993, 19) ‘the term “China” has a similar arbitrariness and ‘*Chineseness* is not an immutable set of beliefs and practices, but a process which captures a wide range of emotions and states of being.’ ‘Being Chinese’ she says, ‘involves diverse groups in continuous negotiation of their cultural identity and history in order to establish a legitimate position in a volatile but all encompassing state order’ (Siu 1993, 22).

Tu Wei-ming (1991, 1-3) reinforces the fluidity of the discourse and its political and ethnic concerns when he writes that:

Chinese culture, the generic term symbolizing the vicissitudes of the material and spiritual accomplishments of the Chinese people, has undergone major interpretive phases in recent decades and is now entering a new era of critical self-reflection....Although it is often noted that culture, rather than ethnicity, features prominently in defining Chineseness, the cultured and civilized Chinese, as the myth goes, claim a common ancestry. Indeed, the symbol of the “children of the Yellow Emperor” is constantly re-enacted in Chinese literature and evokes feelings of ethnic pride.

This brief description of the *Chineseness* discourse as it relates to an understanding of Chinese culture highlights the differences between a cross-cultural inquiry and an internal inquiry into Chinese culture. This thesis, as an example of cross-cultural inquiry, makes implicit claims about what practice and the symbol of ancestor worship ‘mean’ for the culture, basing the claims on a description of a clearly observable empirical object: the ritual treated as *text*. The rituals become text in that they are ‘analogous to culturally produced texts’ that may be interpreted as bestowing ‘meaning upon experience’ (Marcus and Michael 1986, 61). This way of understanding ritual has in recent years led to advances in the study of ritual, ‘particularly in disciplines...whose practitioners see them, or are beginning to see them, as primarily ‘interpretative’ endeavours’ (Bell 1992, 15-16).

The publicly observable symbols and rituals of ancestor worship become an empirical object, rather than something hidden away in individual consciousness. The

Chineseness discourse, as Helen Sui notes above, does not involve ‘an immutable set of beliefs and practices.’ Whereas the thesis’ aim is to describe and find meaning, the *Chineseness* discourse is deontological in that it examines the culture from its own position and then tries to define where the culture should go.

This work, besides being ‘practice’ oriented, also uses a symbolic anthropological approach, and therefore focuses largely on [Chinese] culture as a whole where rather than on specific aspects of culture that are isolated from one another. It sees culture in its wide ethnographic sense, as a complex whole (Tylor 1958, 1), just as Marcel Mauss (1967, 77-8) sees social systems as wholes where ‘everything merges.’ I am here, as Mauss is, concerned with wholes, which resist being divided into smaller elements because ‘it is only by considering them as wholes that we have been able to see their essence, their operation and their living aspect.’ This view of culture is therefore different from the discourse of *Chineseness* as Chinese culture whose focus is more specific, both in its subject matter – identity and ethnicity, and in a historical sense. Questions about identity and ethnicity, valid and important though they may be, are very specific concerns about a very general notion – culture (as it is employed in this thesis). Comparative cultural perspectives as illustrated here by concepts like China and the West, culture and ideology, seek to clarify issues which deserve to be tested against more differentiated versions of each entity (Blair 1993, 10). The *Chineseness* discourse however sees a different ‘culture.’ It is a culture where contemporary attitudes towards tradition and culture depend only on contemporary conditions. China’s long historical culture counts for little from these perspectives.

When it becomes necessary to inspire the people, to revitalize their natural confidence, the traditional culture is more useful; when there is need to break away from the bondage of feudal autocracy, then the slogans for violent attack against the traditional culture are put up in readiness; and then when idealism turns into disillusionment, some of the would-be radical reformers who were once so anti-tradition and anti-authority now become dispirited and seek to reinstate the old tradition, to the point in advocating a new authoritarianism. (Li 1991, 254)

Whereas the Chineseness discourse emphasizes the variability of Chinese culture (Tu 1991, 1-3) and that it has ‘undergone major interpretive phases in recent decades and is now entering a new era of critical self-reflection’, this thesis has emphasised its continuity and unity.

Cohen (1991, 115) also notes China’s cultural unity in spite of its pronounced linguistic diversity.

I am able to confirm on the basis of my own field research in four widely separated Chinese villages [from the 1960s to the 1990s] that even where differences in spoken language were most obvious the Han Chinese shared traits so numerous as to readily place them in a culture area easily distinguished from those of nearby state civilizations in Asia. (Cohen 1991, 115)

Allen Chun highlights another distinguishing feature of this discourse when he notices its origination in the ranks of the Chinese elite. This is also, interestingly, a drawback

of the Confucian discourse in regard to cultural epistemology, which I engage with in chapter two. Chun (1996 11) writes that:

In the context of the state, such discourses [as Chineseness] rarely emanate directly from the people themselves but are articulated by the state, intellectuals, and other vested interests, all of whom claim naturally to speak on behalf of "society as a whole."

Most Chinese do not see their traditional culture as being 'incompatible either with modern nationalism or with national modernization (Cohen 1991, 113), and the 'resurgence of ritual practice in a time of relative prosperity' (Anagnost 1994 224) underscores this compatibility. However, 'China's traditional elites were cultural brokers, for their high status in society was based upon nationally accepted standards also validated by local culture. In contrast, the pronounced cultural antagonism separating the new elite from the masses represents a barrier between state and society....' (Cohen 1991, 113-114)

1:2:3: Cultural continuity

A critical assumption of this thesis, as opposed to the *Chineseness* discourse, is the continuity of Chinese culture. Although there appears to be a disjunction between Chinese tradition and Chinese modernity, and although 'much of what appears to be "traditional" China seems to be disappearing, paradoxical as it may seem, the traditional background still plays a significant part...in steering [today's] China' (Liu and Tu 1970, 1). Thomas Metzger (1977, ix) makes even stronger claims about China's traditional cultural continuity in the face of historical adversity when he writes that:

No culture in the world matches China's in durability. Moreover, it is a culture long under siege. For two hundred years it has staved off challenges from the West. Then for more than three decades Chinese culture has been brutally attacked and insulted, decried and denied from within by the extermination campaigns of the Chinese Communists. Yet China's cultural tradition persists and seems to be engulfing its Communist tormentors.

Although we may question the degree to which ancestor worship has been treated by Confucian elite of imperial times, and whether or not modern educated Chinese engage with ancestor worship in a serious and religious way, for the vast majority of Chinese people, ancestor worship is an integral part of their religious world view. For them the ancestral altar at home ties the family to a religious system that transcends the family. 'This is the system of the lineage ancestral cult, which roots every family in past history and, at the same time, ties it to all other families of common ancestry'(Jochim 1986, 170). As a continuing cultural activity, ancestor worship has been important for the Chinese from earliest times to the present and as a symbol of cultural continuance it has no other rivals.

It is not well known and appreciated in the West⁵, that during its long and traditional history China developed and maintained a highly complex and successful culture, enabling it to extend the empire 'so early to a world as vast as Europe and containing human beings of comparable diversity'(Gernet 1982, 27). No civilization in the world today has had a longer continuity than the Chinese (Ho 1976, 547). From its ancient beginnings until recent times China has withstood constant evolutionary changes. As

⁵ See Raymond Dawson's (1967) *The Chinese Chameleon* for a full account of this claim and 'an analysis of European conceptions of Chinese civilization' throughout the modern ages and up until the mid-twentieth century.

a distinctive culture (Nathan 1993, 923) it has strongly underpinned a highly organized and continuous socio-political entity. Underscored by continuity, 'it is quite false to see the elimination of the Sino-Manchu dynasty in 1912 as the end of a two-thousand-year-old political system' (Granet 1982, 21). Since the 1950s, the constant surveillance, crippling regulation, and persecution of religion that is attributed to CCP policies is not something new. Throughout China's last two thousand years, the state has held absolute right of control and intervention over religious and other activities (Thompson 1973, 231)⁶, so it is not logical to infer a necessary irreparable disjunction due to the CCP religious policies alone. Joseph Levenson (1958, 156) was suggesting its continuous nature when he wrote that 'maybe China is forever China, as the saying is, absorbing everyone, and nothing has been new in a crowded century except ephemeral detail, spilling over a changeless paradigm of Chinese history.' China's civilizational continuity is an extraordinary example of longevity, yet this extraordinary success story is only just beginning to be appreciated, and only rarely explained. As a distinctive characteristic, this successful cultural continuity is most often ignored, an omission this thesis seeks to rectify. Weber went even further when he came to see this 'extraordinary example of longevity' as a cultural weakness of its 'internal transformative capacities' (Eisenstadt 2003, 282), a view I will discuss in greater detail in the conclusion of the thesis.

The cultural strategy of the Chinese, throughout their long and continuous history, has enabled China to be successful; successful as measured by cultural survival and continuity, combined with its size and power over such a long history. These cultural

⁶ ——— This discrimination was not directed against religion *per se*. 'It was directed against the category of religious believers which was unwilling or unable to reconcile devotion to one's faith with loyalty to the [current] regime' (Thompson 1973, 234).

strategies have occurred over a long period of time, and we need to look for the source of these strategies, as patterns or ‘webs of significance’ in China’s distant past, and throughout its history and development. Culture, as a strategy for survival, subsumes other concepts such as ideology, philosophy, religion and should be seen, along with other related strategies, as significant cultural strategies – *significants*. It is a general way of thinking which for thousands of years has allowed and enabled the Chinese to maintain a continuous and enduringly successful society. The culture of a people subsumes not only their philosophy and/or their religion, but also that entire collection of views, beliefs and actions concerned with those important and significant aspects of a society. It concerns ‘every aspect of life: know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language, symbols, socio-political and economic behavior, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations, and so on’ (Verhelst 1990, 17). Culture emphasizes continuance, and the continuing importance of the family, for example, is revealing as an institutionalization of continuity in China. Even revolutionary political changes may have limited impact on cultural continuities (Blair 1993, 2).

Since the Opium War the Chinese have gone through a number of violent periods. However, as Li points out, the extent to which change occurs is questionable.

Historical changes and the unremitting efforts of generations of thinkers have provided many favourable turns in the modernization of the traditional Chinese way of thinking, and some reasonable elements of the Western civilization have more or less been assimilated. Yet, since the traditional way has been followed for generations, it will always be characterized by stability, solidity, and exclusivity, and the innermost core of its structure will be hard to change. (Li 1991, 256)

Marx (1951, 225) adds his own insights to the argument for cultural continuity when he writes that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past’. Therefore, in reference to culture, we can easily agree with Hall and Jefferson (1976, 11), that it ‘embodies the trajectory of group life through history’, and it is this trajectory which we see as the continuing nature of culture. ‘The cultural traditions established in [ancient] China were *ancestral*⁷ to all that followed, continuing to exert their influence down to recent, if not contemporary times’ (Keightly 1990, 54).

1.3. Caveats

1:3:1 Generalizations

Here I want to clarify, qualify, and say something about my approach and method that may be considered unusual; a caveat against conformity and conventionality. I have already written at length about the hermeneutical process, and part of this process is to move from the general to the specific to the general. In trying to understand various things about China, I apply the very general concept of culture for this purpose; the aim to know more about culture (the more general concept), in order to know more about things (the specific and particular), and the more known about things will help better understand the more general, and so on. China and Chinese culture fall into that category of a generalization, a stereotype, and the use of generalizations throughout this thesis is necessary and desirable. Part of the need for generalizations and stereotypes is the determination to synthesize the multivocality of cultural voices from different regions and various historical eras – a striving for the whole of culture.

⁷ My emphasis

As Blair (1993, 10) reminds us, there is an inherent worth in ‘improving on widely held stereotypes through comparative analysis. Such acts of conscious redefinition of other in relation to self remain an indispensable part of long-term process commonly referred to as education.’

Questions about who the Chinese are, exactly, as they constitute the participants of their culture, are not a concern of a generalization. Nor does it matter overly much that at times I will refer to us as the Western ‘other’, sometimes meaning more the Western academy, sometimes the more general field of those influenced by the academy, sometimes a general field of ‘intelligentsia’ and leaders, and sometimes just the chattering classes. Most times I will situate the meaning within how I am using the generalization at the time. However, at all times I am treating the generalized term as just that: general, stereotypical, sometimes universal, but always non-specific – just as it should be treated. So my caveat here is that my emphasis many times throughout will be general, and a precise meaning should not be sought. Returning to Blair (1993, 10) again, he reminds us that ‘Despite the essentialist traditions dominant in the Western world, awareness of Chinese differences from ourselves reminds us that humans live in worlds of cultural constructs’, and it is these general constructs which are of most interest here. Comparative cultural perspectives as illustrated here by concepts like China and the West, culture and ideology, seek to clarify issues which deserve to be tested against more differentiated versions of each entity (Blair 1993, 10).

1:3:2. Translation.

All of the original Chinese texts quoted have been translated into English. There are many translations and interpretations of these texts; however, where possible, I have opted for the better known translations by James Legge, Arthur Waley, Wing-tsit

Chan and Burton Watson. Of the two major systems for transliterating Chinese characters, Wade-Giles and pinyin, I have chosen pinyin, the official and most widely used. However I will retain the use of some Wade-Giles transcription for some well known names and as they are used in the translations.

Chapter 2

Challenging the Dominant Discourse: *Confucianism-as-Chinese-Culture*

An overriding sentiment of the thesis is to engage with and endeavour to overcome any ‘prejudice against ritual’ as a cultural epistemological key. It achieves this with ‘eyes wide opened to the importance of ritual’ (Turner 1995, 7-9) as it exposes many aspects of Chinese culture that have been in the past glossed over due to theoretical constraints imposed by our own culture and our over-reliance on the paradigm and discourse of *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* as the key to its understanding.

Cultural and historical phenomena are more ‘fully intelligible only in the light of values embodied and expressed in symbols as ritual performances’ (Turner 1995, 7-9) and it will be the role of the later chapters to bring to light the cultural values found in ancestor worship.

The thesis rationale has, coincidentally, followed Neville’s (2003, 531) argument that a reconstructed study of the signs and symbols [of Chinese ritual]⁸ provides thick access to all layers of [culture⁹]. This practice method and way of approach allows us to more easily recognize configurations and patterns of action leading to the formulation of general relationships, a necessary condition for understanding other cultures, and ‘the founding ambition of the social sciences at the beginning of this century [20th] (particularly in their sociological and Durkheimian versions)’ (Chartier Roger 1997). Practice method is an attempt to overcome the disjuncture between the

⁸ My brackets

⁹ Neville prefers the word ‘civilization’ here, and while semantic differences are important, I think the use of the term culture would not bother him too much. This chapter of his is in fact titled ‘Philosophy of Culture.’

‘official accounts’ of what people do in their daily lives and what people actually do. ‘In other words, [practice theory asks the question], what is it that produces behaviour, if it is so clearly *not* the cultural knowledge which is revealed in “official” public discourse’ (Jenkins 1992, 69)? Although the thesis will in general have to make a case for the importance of ancestor worship and its associated rituals in relation to understanding Chinese culture, and like Monica Wilson (1957, 6), take it for granted that ‘any analysis not based on some translation of the symbols used by people of that culture is open to suspicion,’ the question of Confucianism still looms large. And so the purpose of this chapter is to engage with the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* discourse and to make clear where Confucianism sits in this analysis and decide whether it should be open to suspicion as the leading cultural narrative?

2:1 Confucianism as a metonym for Chinese culture

There are many ways to understand a culture, but the popular Western understanding of Chinese culture most often falls within the bounds of the dominant discourse: Confucianism. Western commentators have usually referred to Chinese society as Confucian (Milston 1978, 117). ‘Confucius and his school are responsible for the pedagogic tradition which characterizes all of later China, [and] ...if we were to characterize in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years’, says W. M. Theodore de Bary (1963, 15, 19), ‘the word would be *Confucian*’. Wing-tsit Chan (1963, 14) confirms this sentiment when he writes that ‘Confucius can truly be said to have molded Chinese civilization in general.’

However, despite the master status of the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* discourse, Raymond Dawson (1967, 6) has a counter view and claims that Western Sinologists have excessively focused on the Confucian classics. He provides an example of this excess and cites the classical translations of James Legge, which were ‘written a century ago, [and] are still considered so necessary and standard a tool that they were recently reprinted in their entirety by the University of Hong Kong.’

More recently we have the popular culture rendition of *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* in the *Beijing Review*, (29-11-2008, 41):

One of the most poignant moments during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games on August 8 was the scene where 3,000 performers in the guise of Confucius’ disciples, each holding a roll of bamboo-strip book, recited the Confucian classics. This performance presented to the audience a very important period in the development of Chinese culture.

Another recent example, from the *China Daily* (18-8-2005), is an article titled ‘Confucianism is the backbone of ancient Chinese culture.’ Quoting Professor Zhang Liwen, from Renmin University it says: ‘Confucianism is the root of the Chinese culture. Only when there are deep roots will there be thick foliage.’ Therefore, while the task of the thesis proper is to provide an alternative and more nuanced means for understanding China, the task of this chapter is to engage and challenge the conventional *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* way of understanding China, and to clear a conceptual pathway for the exposition of evidence and links to an understanding of ancestor worship and ritual as an alternative and more efficacious means of understanding.

While Confucianism is the leading narrative and the key symbol for understanding China, its role in these positions is not unchallenged, and counter views, besides those of Dawson (above) persist. The anthropologist James Watson argues that ‘the whole of Confucianism is a mirage’ and he has ‘difficulty identifying what it is and what it is not’ (Tu 1992, 51). He noted that:

Anthropologists who work on the ground in Chinese cultural areas tend to be very suspicious of the *Confucian* label. It tends to be a catchall phrase, a kind of box that will hold almost anything. (Tu 1992, 92)

In an illuminating work concerning the conceptualization of Confucianism, Lionel Jensen (1993, 3) describes how ‘China and the West have been bound in imagination by the concepts of Confucius and Confucianism since the late seventeenth century’. He sees Confucianism as being ‘manufactured’ into a ‘definitive ethos of the Chinese – their civil religion, their official cult, their intellectual tradition’ where it has become ‘indistinguishable from what it signifies – China, especially the China of the ageless rhythms of family, field, and forebears’ (Jensen 1993, 4). Deborah Sommer (1995, xx), agreeing with Jensen, but also including Taoism in the discourse, notes their artificiality as products of Western sinology. It becomes clear that Confucianism is a generic Western term that has no corresponding term in Chinese, although it is variously described as a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. Although Confucianism may be understood in many important ways, or precisely because of that, ‘it is [still] an exaggeration to characterize traditional Chinese life and culture as *Confucian* culture’ (Tu 1992, 49).

Confucianism, as a Western invention, derived its authority from a Western hegemonic position which over the last 400 years or so, needed to describe the narrative of Chinese thought in Western terms - religious and philosophical terms. It had to fit into the West's paradigm of understanding, and this meant fitting into those categories within that paradigm. It is an uncertain term, but it is nevertheless clear that it is most often understood in the West within the religious and philosophical discourses. These Western discourses, expressed as the West's meta-narrative, are found within a self-fulfilling, ideological paradigm and a consequential prophecy that gives primacy to the hegemony – Western-centrism. Al-Azmeh (1991, 468) declares that 'despite protests...it remains incontestable...that modern history is characterized by the globalization of the Western order'. 'Furthermore', he adds, 'it is clear that Western economic and political conquest and hegemony' have caused 'correlative conditions of equally real ideological and cultural hegemony'. For users of the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* discourse and symbol, there are both hermeneutical and epistemological (cultural epistemological)¹⁰ problems.

2:2 The Hermeneutical Problematic

A comparative inquiry of civilizational/cultural¹¹ thought will show that the problem relating to founders and followers of that thought is universal. The hermeneutical problematic is 'how do the interpretation of the followers relate themselves to the original or primitive teachings of the founders? Or, conversely, can the original teachings of the founders be extricated from the interpretations of the followers' (Schwartz 1975, 3)? The translation of these canonical texts remains one of the most

¹⁰ I use the term *cultural epistemology* to highlight the difference between the philosophical uses of the word as it relates to knowledge and its acquisition, and the cultural use as it relates to understanding.

¹¹ I use the juxtaposed term here to distinguish a particular kind of culture – the culture of a civilization.

difficult tasks involved in cross-cultural interpretation. It entails ‘many different linguistic, aesthetic, axiomatic, logical, metaphysical and political “pretexts” and practices’ (Pfister 2003, 734). The discourse of Confucianism must to some extent depend on the original teachings and texts of Confucius and the Confucian school for consistent thought and for its boundaries. However, as is shown by the exposition below, consistency, clarity, and agreement about meaning, and the authenticity and intent of the Confucian teachings and the (so-called) Confucian texts are far from achieved.

2:2:1 The Confucian Texts

The Confucian texts, as the evidence and the womb from which Confucianism is born and nurtured, contain the same problem as most other works of such historical significance – uncertainty about source and meaning. The image of Confucianism in the West has always been closely related to how these classics have been evaluated. The Confucian texts have for over two thousand years been analyzed to the extreme and in minute detail ‘by generations of scholars in an effort to discover some hidden message which Confucius was attempting to relay to posterity’ (Watson 1962, 38). The Confucian corpus, though, remains a stubbornly difficult subject for analysis, as it is a convoluted and complex system of interpretations which are often contradictory and reconstructed. Debates and arguments concerning what are original texts and how much Confucius contributed towards them have been an ongoing concern. Some modern scholars have even argued that Confucius had nothing to do with the texts attributed to him (Watson 1962, 128). Herrlee Creel (1960, 106) insists that ‘we have no convincing evidence that [Confucius] wrote or even edited anything at all. This is

not an original verdict; an increasing number of scholars have reached this conclusion in recent years.'

The Confucian *literati*, as the name suggests, followed a tradition of books¹² where the sacred writings of the ancients were the source of values and ideals. The ancient classics, as the core of Confucian doctrines, are the font of all the Confucian wisdom. 'Indeed without a proper knowledge of Confucian classics, it would be impossible for us to draw a full picture of Confucianism' (Yao 2000, 47). It is interesting to note however that many of the pre-Confucian texts such as the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Odes*, and the *Book of Changes*, eventually came to be seen as Confucian texts (Watson 1962, 124), and along with other texts of the times, such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Li Ji or Book of Rites*, the *Analects*, and the short *Classic of Filial Piety*, became the official texts of Confucianism and the Han state.

However problems arise when it revealed that these official and culturally significant (for some) texts of ancient China are only known through later texts. 'The oldest extant texts of the works are in most cases printed editions dating a thousand years or more after the composition of the works themselves' (Watson 1962, 5), and this brings with it enormous implications regarding the authority and legitimacy of the texts, especially as sources for the cultural paradigm, *Confucianism-as-Chinese*.

Furthermore, even after overcoming many of these problems of legitimacy, there is also the problem of style. It was a practice of early Chinese writers to place their 'words of wisdom', [I avoid the term 'philosophy' for obvious reasons given above],

¹² I relate this 'tradition of books' below to the 'cult of the book' and its polar other in this thesis, the 'cult of the ancestors'; text versus action; theory opposed to practice.

within real historical settings, and also a common practice of those giving historical accounts to embellish them with ‘words of wisdom’ and to attribute those words to the historical figures they were writing about. That is, ‘many works of history are coloured by philosophical bias, and many philosophical works abound in historical anecdotes and allusions’ (Watson 1962, 7-8).

More than just problems with authenticity, though, the Confucians also managed, as a strategy of power and domination, to suppress other forms of literature which may have provided alternative or different views. Popular folk stories and ballads, which we know existed, are either rare or non-existent after the sixth century B.C. (Watson 1962, 5). Therefore, the popular view of the culture which may have been found in these works is no longer available to us and so we are forced, (if we rely on texts), to rely on the formal texts of the Confucian literati, and through the selected and formal historical texts of writers who were most often also the guardians and regulators of these early works. The Confucian *Analects* themselves, the earliest work on Confucius’ life and teachings, did not attain their current form until at least one hundred years after his death. The authorship is still uncertain, and they are only ‘a compilation of incomplete and partial dialogues requiring guesswork from those who are interpreting (Watson 1962, 127).’ Its reliability is further questioned as contemporary works of the period make no mention of the *Analects*.

Burton Watson (1962, 21) makes it clear that the ‘semi-fictitious speech’ employed by ancient writers and used in much of the Confucian canon is a ‘dangerous instrument in historians’ hands.’ And I would add not only historians, but those who use or adapt the historical evidence gleaned from the Confucian texts to promote or

explain their versions of Chinese culture or Chinese cultural traits. In relation to a hermeneutic approach to the historical development of renderings of classical Chinese philosophy texts, it is clear that these translations are of varied quality and they call attention to a range of different philosophical positions. And it is these translations of varied and questionable quality that ‘have now become the bailiwick of Sinological experts responsive to, but rarely trained in, philosophical research’ (Pfister 2003, 738). Furthermore, any philosophical theories announced and found in the Ruist/Confucian texts ‘served only secondary functions. We may have been reading the texts with irrelevant expectations’ (Eno 1990, 10): reader expectations conditioned by culture and ideology.

2:2:2 Confucianism: A disputed term

The term *Confucianism* itself is a much disputed and often ambiguous term. There is no agreement about what it means. One commentator even goes as far to say that ‘if [Confucianism] is the original teachings of Confucius in the *Analects*, then almost nothing said about Confucianism today speaks to that’ (De Bary 1991, xi). It is clear that Confucianism is important, but how important and what role it plays is not so clear, although, ironically, most writers in the subject often ‘treat Confucianism as if its content were self-evident, simple, and unchanging’ (Nivison and Wright 1959, 3).

Confucianism is not a simple, unitary philosophical or ethical code, but a complex body of values and ideological concepts that has altered through time. ‘The meaning of “Confucianism” is ambiguous. Since scholars understand the term to mean different things, it is no wonder that there is a lack of communication among them’

(Liu 1996, 92). As a direct consequence of all the problems associated with the Confucian texts and their interpretation, when we refer to China as being a Confucian culture the meaning of this term is so widely disputed that it is of little practical use in attributing cultural value and significance. Not only is the authority and meaning of the so-called Confucian texts disputed, but also the meaning of Confucianism itself is disputed, among scholars (and generally neglected among the Chinese people).

Theodore De Bary writes (1959, 25) that he and other eminent sinologists and scholars of the *Committee on Chinese Thought* 'have been perplexed in defining the scope and character of Confucianism.' He and his colleagues speak of Confucianisms and stress the multiplicity of Confucian thought and 'the social contexts in which it functioned.' He draws attention to our dilemma without really pointing a way out, but he does rightly warn us against any simplistic characterizations of Confucianism.

It is clear that there is no specific set of attributes that describe what Confucianism is, and according to Gilbert Rozman (Tu 1992, 5), even in China, Confucianism is viewed differently according to social place or position. Confucianism lends itself to a number of disciplinary approaches, such as philosophical, religious, historical, sociological, political and anthropological, providing a master narrative of both great range and great complexity. The outcome is a subject which is often seen as contradictory, ambiguous, multi-layered, but always inter-related.

Dirlik (1995, 251) has assembled an impressive list of *Confucianisms* (and he concedes there are many others he 'may have missed'), which correspond to similar lists by Rozman (1991, 160) and Tu, (1992, 40) highlighting the ambiguity and uncertainty of the uses of the term:

Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Singaporean Confucianisms...social
 Confucianism, vulgar Confucianism, low Confucianism, high Confucianism, folk
 Confucianism, bourgeois Confucianism, imperial Confucianism, reform
 Confucianism, social-elites-not-holding-high-government-post Confucianism,
 merchant house Confucianism, and mass Confucianism.

Robert Eno (1990, 6-7) discusses the use and misuse of the term at length. He suggests that the term Confucianism is very confusing and it should be entirely abandoned due to its 'ambiguities and irrelevant traditional.' He does however suggest another term, *Ruism*, but warns that its core teachings 'lay outside its texts in a detailed training course of ritual, music and gymnastics' (Eno 1990, 9). Eno's position here is quite close to that of this thesis, although the emphasis of the thesis is obviously ritual and not music and gymnastics, and its approach is more varied and trans-disciplinary.

2:2:3 Elite Confucianism

The uncertainty around the texts and the meaning of the term Confucianism begs the questions of whether these uncertain texts really hold the Confucian tradition together or whether there is something else which has been so central to Chinese culture, a culture which has proven to be so resilient for so long. One important meaning for the term *Confucianism* is what Arif Dirlik (1995, 251) refers to as 'high or social-elites-not-holding-high-government-post Confucianism', and what is often referred to as elite Confucianism. It is a Confucianism which is 'the traditional view of life and code of manners, [which can be found within the Confucian classics], of the Chinese

gentry' (Graham 1988, 357, 359). This type of Confucianism, concerns the use of selected Confucian texts and ideas as they are taught to prospective and incumbent scholar-officials; it is a gentlemanly code-of-conduct for the Chinese gentry.

As one type or category of meaning, the term 'elite', when applied to a seemingly distinct group in Chinese history, appears to be relatively concrete, but even here there are hermeneutical problems. Is Confucianism really, no more than as Graham defines it? For even though to some 'Confucianism literally means the tradition of literati/scholars' (Yao 2000, 31), for others it is not as distinct. Peter Bol (1992, 15) provides an example of the conceptual problems when he writes:

the use of *Confucian* and *Confucianism* as general terms for Chinese political elite and their values obscures distinctions among [them] and changes over time. The learning associated with being a *ju*, the most obvious equivalent of being a "Confucian," was not constant; few Han and T'ang scholars would have agreed with Sung thinkers that it meant the learning of Confucius and Mencius. (Bol 1992, 15)

This leads us to consider another popular misconception – that Confucianism, as a practice at least, (whatever that is contrived to be), was importantly ubiquitous throughout Chinese post-Han history. In fact in regards to any claims to being comprehensive it may be considered elite and no more than a particular array of Confucian principles and ethical practices of the scholar-officials. Morton Fried (1973, 348) questions 'whether China was ever truly Confucianist, if we mean by this that Confucianism permeated all social class levels.'

Edward Shils (1996, 59) sees the elitist and culturally non-representative aspect of Confucianism when he writes that:

[Confucius] conceived of society as having one major centre – the ruler and his court – and a very large number of peripheral centres – great families and their lineages – which were largely autonomous and relatively self-constrained. All initiative and decision were concentrated in the major center. The vast majority of the population, the common people, had no initiative and no voice in any discussions about the society in which they lived.

Nearly all the authors of the important texts of ancient China, whether those texts are considered as poetry, history, or philosophy, were at the same time government officials, (or sought to be), or members of the philosophical schools which sought official sanction and support. They were either members of the ruling elite or aspired to be members, and their primary intellectual concern was political. The ancient texts of China, 'official or otherwise, deal almost entirely with the activities of China's ruling elite and are available to us only in a form ready edited and packaged by that elite' (Keay 2008, 5).

Confucianism is also one of the three religions of China. However there is only a tenuous link between Confucianism which is seen as part of the popular folk religion, (which treats Confucius as a spiritual entity and which blends easily with ancestor worship, and also Taoism, Buddhism, and shamanistic beliefs), and the state cult of Imperial Confucianism. Furthermore, both the folk religion of Confucianism, and the elite Confucianism of Imperial design, 'differ from philosophical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism' (Fried 1973, 348). Confucianism's role as some sort of key to an understanding of Chinese culture comes into question when its connection with elitism and hegemony is made clear and its disconnection with the broader society is

emphasized. Ancestor worship, on the other hand, connects with the great majority of Chinese people. It has been a widespread and egalitarian practice as the ancestors have been important for all Chinese.

For many modern educated [elite] Chinese, as perhaps for the Confucian elite of former times, “worship” of ancestors is a matter of remembrance or commemoration and nothing more. Yet for the great majority of other Chinese, ancestor worship is part and parcel of humanity’s religious relations with the spirit worlds. For them, just as the stove god represents the family to the Jade Emperor in Heaven and thereby links it to the universal divine-human bureaucracy, the home ancestral altar ties the family to another religious system that transcends the household. This is the system of the lineage ancestral cult, which roots every family in past history and, at the same time, ties it to all other families of common ancestry. (Jochim 1986, 170)

The problematic of using the thoughts of the elite to deduce the thoughts of the majority is taken up by Benjamin Schwartz (1985, 407) when he writes that his own seminal work concerning the ‘world of thought’ in China only engages with the ‘modes of thought reflected in the texts of the [elite] “high culture” and not on the conscious life of the vast majority who neither read nor wrote.’ In partial opposition to Maurice Freedman (1979, 355) who maintained that ‘elite culture and peasant culture [in China] were not different things; they were versions of each other’, Schwartz’s own leaning was not to justify the focus on the elite texts in the expectation that the elite exposition was that of an unproblematic ‘parallelism’ of the two versions of the same culture. Indeed he suggests that while the elite culture of China may emerge with the rise of civilization out of the same broad neolithic matrix

as the culture of the people, it later diverges in crucial ways from the popular culture’ (Schwartz, 1985, 408).

The most plausible explanation for the focus of Western academia on the elite culture, as *Elite Confucianism*, is simply that there are very few other resources which may be used to provide direct evidence about the thoughts of the majority and their popular culture. And of course the texts of the elite do play an important role in illuminating our understanding of the shared culture of the Chinese – elite or otherwise. However, as far as those texts actually representing the entire or the general culture, it is interesting to note that ‘even in the modern period, the highly religious *Almanac (Lishu)* enjoys a much wider sale in China than the rationalistic Confucian classics’ (Yang 1967, 270).

Our efforts here in this thesis are concerned with a better understanding of Chinese culture, so the illumination we seek is from a number of light sources; an understanding gained from various views; a thick description where ancestor worship and Chinese culture are described and re-described in an hermeneutical spiral via historical texts and text-analogues (relics etc.), philosophical analysis, empirical ethnographic field research, or any other means available. When used in unison under the rubric of a symbolic analysis (rituals of ancestor worship), our view of the illuminated subject is much clearer, for as different as they are, we are simply dealing with an integrated whole of the ‘variant versions of a common cultural system’ (Schwartz 1985, 408).

2:2:4 Confucianism’s inception and Confucius’ claims

Confucianism postdates the central and inceptive ideas and themes which constitute Chinese culture, society and traditions. It is generally agreed that to understand the continuous nature of Chinese culture and civilization the process of understanding must begin with its embryonic beginnings. The most important texts of ancient China are those of Confucius and his followers. The Confucian literati made themselves the special guardians of the ancient literature of China and the sole transmitters and interpreters of the ancient texts (Watson 1962, 124). Confucius had this in mind when he often said that he was not an innovator but was just passing on the wisdom from the past. The master said in the *Analects* (7:1), 'I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients' (Chan 1963, 30). And, from the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Chan 1963, 111) we are told that Confucius transmitted the ancient traditions of Yao and Shun, and he modeled and made brilliant the systems of King Wen and King Wu.

Confucius 'never saw himself as a leader or founder of a religious tradition; what he did was merely to transmit the ancient culture, which in his mind was the model for the present and the guarantee for the future' (Yao 2000, 26). And even though he was very important as a transmitter of the Confucian tradition, Confucius himself 'does not represent the highest manifestation of the Confucian ideal. Yao and Shun, as the sage kings, could be considered *more Confucian than Confucius*' (Tu 1992, 49).

The early Confucians were concerned with the conservation of culture, and the Confucian aim was to revitalize and strengthen those institutions and values that were thought to have maintained a successful society which had existed for centuries in harmony and prosperity. While it is recognized that the early Confucians claimed to

be transmitting the values and knowledge inherent within the ways of the ancients, and that Chinese culture is by its very nature continuous, it seems curious that Chinese culture should be so clearly identified with Confucianism – the *prima-facie* case, considering the evidence and not the recent claims, is weak indeed.

Therefore, in summarizing the hermeneutical problematic it is clear that not only did Confucius himself deny any innovation, there is also a lack of convincing evidence regarding the so-called Confucian texts and their direct relationship with Confucius, his writing, editing, even his spoken word. Much of the words of wisdom and the historical settings attributed to ancient writings may in fact be devices used by later writers, commentators, and interpreters. There is a distinct lack of other forms of textual evidence which offered alternative or different views to those of the *literati* or *Ru* as the men who were the producers and custodians of so much of this early literature. Not only are the Confucian texts open to dispute about authority and meaning, but the term Confucianism itself is also open to interpretation and dispute about what cultural value and significance can be attributed to it. The indiscriminate use of the term Confucianism leads either to Confucianism meaning simply Chinese, and therefore providing no more information, or to the term being ‘applied to everything indiscriminately, is felt to have content, albeit this content is fuzzily conceived’ (Nivison and Wright 1959, 3).

So the question remains, how is it, that given the doubts and inconsistencies within the textual and historical grounds of Confucianism, it remains the preferred key to an understanding of Chinese culture. The answer lies in another realm of epistemic problems than those of hermeneutics discussed above.

2:3 Epistemological problems and ideology

The epistemological problems of the discourse *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* align themselves with a constellation of ideas around ideology, hegemony, culture, and ritual. The epistemological consideration also relates to the effect that these various paradigmatic ideas have on what is known and understood as China in the ‘context of the times’ (Schwartz 1975, 4). It appears that ‘despite their variety, Western images of China have tended to follow fashions’ (Mackerras 1987, 1) and that ‘what affected the West’s images of China was less ignorance than [fashions of] politics and ideology’ (Mackerras 1987, 5). Conceptions of China have both reflected the ‘the spirit of the times’ (*Zeitgeist*) in which these conceptions were formed, and also the ‘stale beliefs of earlier ages’ (Dawson 1967, 174) as they continually influence the present.

2:3:1 Ethno-centric Distortion

The main epistemological problem with the West’s understanding of Chinese culture is one of Western ethno-centric distortion. An understanding of the multi-layered complexities of Chinese culture requires an appreciation of the historical ground from which this culture has emerged, and, unable to understand China in any other way than to carve up this historical reality and place it into a number of accepted Western conceptual categories, the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* understanding succumbs to the falsehood of trying to fit the foot (of actuality and particularity), into the non-fitting shoe (of Confucianism); the Chinese version of the Procrustean bed.

Although both the West and China share the hermeneutical problematic of founders and followers their paths diverge dramatically when considered in the broad cultural context. 'The consequence of this divergence is that the problematic of Western culture and those of Chinese culture are really quite different. They are 'distinct enough between China and the West so as to make the task of translating issues and meanings from one culture to another extremely challenging' (Hall and Ames 1995, xiv), and the over-simple use of the Confucian metonym does not successfully engage with this challenge.

A major obstacle which hinders the West from understanding China on its own terms involves the seemingly resolute determination of Western culture/s to impose its/their 'transcendental pretense' (Solomon 1993). This contradictory intent assumed by Western (Enlightenment) ethnocentrism has scientific rationality applied irrationally on the basis that Western cultural values are the universal norms for assessing the value of cultural activity of all other cultures. The West, having not only directly and heavily participated in the making of Chinese history, has taken a leading role in the creation of conceptual paradigms for understanding it. This Western-centric influence is not restricted to Westerners though. Even the Chinese themselves have consistently utilized Western concepts and analytical frameworks to articulate and inquire into their recent past and present circumstances (Cohen 1984, 1). These Western paradigms for understanding China, to use a phrase with connotations of imperialism, make China an intellectual possession of the West, as per Edward Said's (1978) construct of orientalism. The implications of the use of the Confucian paradigm for a reasonably balanced appreciation of Chinese tradition and even recent Chinese history are nothing less than, to borrow Feyerabend's terms, 'epistemological

authoritarianism’ and ‘anarchy’: Western-centric authoritarianism and a forced anarchy – where the anarchy aims to ‘confuse rationalists by inventing compelling reasons for unreasonable doctrines’ (Feyerabend 1987, 189).

Paradigms (used in this case for understanding Chinese culture) are, as we know, ‘not just innocuous models of explanation that guide intellectual work. Paradigms are also expressions of social ideologies’ (Dirlik 1996, 244). The global hegemony of Western intelligentsia, or the ‘faculty club culture’, as Peter Berger describes it, promotes ‘the ideas and behaviors invented by Western (mostly American) intellectuals’ (Berger 2002, 4), and reflects the ideologies and values of Western culture. The apparent worth of a paradigm, for example the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* understanding, is not epistemic per se, but instead finds its value in ideology. Therefore, as paradigms guide and control cultural inquiry (Dirlik 1996, 244), and ideology chooses the paradigm, it is ideology that has the most influence on our cultural inquiry. Paraphrasing Thomas Kuhn (1970, 64-65), and relating his comments not just to science but to the social sciences in particular, and to this topic specifically, it is ironic that our understanding of China is inhibited and depleted by a hegemonic paradigm of Confucianism, hegemonic in that it is a product of Western ideological influence.

The discourse of Confucianism, as the narrative of the historical actualities and its consequences, and the dominant paradigm of understanding, controls what texts are allowed into its realm, and the texts define the discourse. The *Confucianism-as-China/Chinese-culture* paradigm is a Western-centric view of Chinese tradition which has evolved into traditional myth, where contradictory or alternative positions are

rarely glimpsed, and its hegemonic power remains unchallenged. So-called orientalism is still an epistemic force to be reckoned with, and is not just an out-dated way of knowing from the colonial past; it is an integral part of modern Western hegemonic inspired thought and ideology. If the term *Confucianism*, coined by Westerners, has any meaning at all, it is clear that it goes far beyond the actual personality or teachings of the great sage (Gernet 1982, 87), and has an artificially constructed meaning, an ideological spin, which exceeds conceptual clarity.

The *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* paradigm suffers problems associated with comparison to Western paradigms of understanding and hegemonic discourses, again a problem of interpretation, but one of a different nature – ideological/cultural ‘encounters’. Western scholarship has bestowed a universal importance on Confucianism on the foundation of a perceived parallelism to Western ideas and ideals found in modern Western thinking in philosophy and religion.

These philosophic and religious claims to new universal status have been secured for Confucianism by East Asian scholars whose work reproduces in another form the interpretive predilections of the Jesuits while it reiterates the current commercial fetishization of Confucius. (Jensen 1997, 14)

The West sees Confucianism as the defining ethos of China, while Confucianism is really only the ‘consequence of centuries of relationship between China and the West’ (Jensen 1997, 4). Confucianism both imposes unrealistic limits and constraints on an understanding of Chinese culture on the one hand, and on the other it brings with it excessive concepts and ideas that detract from an understanding of the significant webs (*significants*) of Chinese culture. European ethno-centric Enlightenment views

helped established Confucianism in the 17th century and these same (self-styled) Enlightenment views now, by way of the power of the dominant ideology, continue to maintain Confucianism and misinterpret the important and underlying features of Chinese society.

The argument for accepting Confucianism as the nexus for understanding Chinese culture is (as far as it is an argument at all) an *argument ad populum*. That is, it is an argument which appeals to the people; the people here being the wider and generalized set of Western academia and all that they influence – the ‘chattering class’. This argument is, in philosophic terms, a fallacy which exploits the prejudices and widely-held beliefs and dominating Western values and ideologies of the people in order to gain support for an argument.

‘Confucianism’, writes Yao (2000, 31), ‘functions as an ideology and a guiding principle permeating the way of life in China’. Yao’s paradigm concept of the correlation between Confucianism and Chinese culture exemplifies the popular position – a position which as argued above, is a product of orientalism, and a skewed paradigm from which to understand Chinese culture and tradition. Confucianism is not only a disputed concept, but also carries with it the baggage of being a Western invention, with the faults, doubts, and inconsistencies commensurate with what I term its *guru-text* basis, but which is also its Western-centric emphasis on religion and philosophy.

2:3:2 Confucianism’s negative *oriental* narrative

Since the early times of Western engagement with China, discourses about China, have been bounded by the concepts of Confucius and Confucianism. Confucianism was initially seen by Westerners as ‘a religion founded by Confucius, as Christianity was founded by Christ and Mohammedanism by Mohammed’ (Graham 1993, 358). Confucianism eventually came to be seen as the identifying marker of the Chinese culture. ‘Indeed the term “Confucianism” has performed such varied service as a charter concept of Chinese culture for the West that it has become indistinguishable from what it signifies – China’ (Jensen 1997, 4). However the universal acceptance of Confucianism conceals its Western created role as the bearer of China's significance, as discourses about China found themselves inextricably drawn into Enlightenment debates about religion and philosophy.

‘*Confucianism* was not created by Confucius’ (Yao 2000, 17), but it was created. ‘More impressive than Chinese popular culture's reinvention of Kongzi [Confucius] have been the steady growth of Sino-Western scholarly interest in Confucius and the religio-philosophical complexes of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism’ (Jensen 1997, 14). However, the greatest problem with the paradigm, ‘China as Confucianism’, is not its artificiality, but its weakness as being more susceptible to Western hegemony. As the West modernized, it saw the ‘death of God’, and the relegation of the biblical texts to a discourse outside rationality and modernity, to a lesser discourse of faith and religion. For Confucius, his fate is even worse as he was not even holy, merely a wise person of 2,500 years ago. When juxtaposed with the Western religious narrative or with Western philosophy, Confucius is no more than of secondary consideration. Even if Confucianism is only held valuable for its ethical stance, philosophers such as ‘Hegel and Max Weber saw this objectified, routinized

stage of ethical practice as inferior to European ethics' (Chow 2003, 648). Confucian ethics were characterized as lacking critical consciousness, and Confucianism became a 'trope for excessive ritualism' (Jensen, 1997, 19). Confucianism was at times seen as a 'quaint old-fashioned doctrine, with Confucius ...reduced to the dimensions of a ... character out of a comic, a purveyor of riddles and jokes ... consigned to a position of inferiority as compared with Europeans ... [providing here] another clear example of [Western] views of China reflecting contemporary [Western] intellectual history' (Dawson, 1967, 65).

The Confucian narrative as the Chinese cultural paradigm reveals much about 'the spirit of the times' in which these conceptions were formed (Dawson 1967, 174). In doing so it also reveals much about the history of Western culture and exposes its dualistic, twin-headed nature as it impacts on contemporary China, where Confucius has now been re-invented by the polity to a position equal to that of the Western invention. By dualism here I do not mean the polarity of views and judgments by the West which over time swung wildly from various positions of extreme admiration to opposite positions of disregard and disrespect, as indicated by the quote below by Jensen.

For Voltaire, [Confucius] could symbolize a genuine non-European moral reason, while for Montesquieu he represented despotism. This symbolic variability reflected contemporary European debates about self, society, and the sacred at the inception of the nation-state. (Jensen 1997, 9)

Furthermore, I am not referring to those Western views of China and Chinese culture subjected to degrees of variation and historical inconsistency, (which belies the actual

continuous nature of the culture), nor to their range of variation and inconsistency.

What I mean by twin headed dualism is that the range is bounded by negative views when comparing Chinese and Western cultural attributes. In simple words, the dualism refers to the West's ethno-centrism, and its positive views of its own culture, and negative views of other cultures.

Ethno-centrism itself is to some extent unavoidable, especially if we consider ethnocentrism as merely a cultural perspective, and Confucianism was born from this cultural perspective. When ethno-centrism is combined with the hegemony of Western culture, epistemic problems increase. One way to overcome or mitigate these problems is to recognize the basic cultural differences between China and the West, and to attempt to negate the Western urge to describe and understand all cultures within Western paradigms.

2:3:3 Practice, rationalism, Truth, and ritual

David Hall, and Roger Ames, (1995, xiv) respond to the challenge of this Western-centric bias and ask us to understand the dramatically diverging historical pathways between both cultures. 'The consequence of this divergence', they say, 'is that the problematic of Western culture and those of Chinese culture are really quite different' and the task of translating an understanding between the two cultures is enormous. To just simply situate selected and translated Chinese texts within Western paradigms and to speak of them within Western (ideological) discourses obscures the fundamental difficulty of cross-cultural understanding. The translation and

interpretation of early Chinese texts into Western metaphysical languages, and the eventual assignation of these interpretations to the status of cultural significance they enjoy today, has inevitably missed the ‘simplicity, poesy, and mystery of early [and later] Chinese thinking’ (Wang 2007, 204). In order to better understand, we must

identify the priority of "practice" as the distinctive character of early Confucian teaching, then it is precisely the meaning of such practice that is still unclear, as its spirit remains unthought. For the priority of practice has nothing to do with the priority of so-called "practical reason" or "practical philosophy." ...The early Confucian classics, which offer initial narratives about such practice, belong neither to science nor to philosophy nor to religion. (Wang 2007, 204)

Here Wang Huaiyu is not only pointing out the difficulty of cross-cultural translation and the pitfalls of placing Chinese thought into Western categories as this chapter has emphasised, but he is also calling attention to the priority of practice in Chinese culture; a central feature of both Chinese culture and the approach of this thesis.

The Western idolization of metaphysics and language is at odds with Chinese cultural thought where the *cult of the ancestor* is more efficacious in Chinese culture than the *cult of the book*, whether that book be a philosophical or religious text. In the West’s quest to understand their most significant cultural other, China, there has been a biased emphasis on metaphysics as the paradigmatic key for this enterprise, yet

it is clear from recent research that the relatively rationalistic approach, [attributed to Confucianism and Confucianists] was not at all typical of the vast majority of the population, including the aristocracy...[and] evidence from later centuries indicates

that veneration of ancestors was practiced by much of the population. (Overmeyer 1995, 2)

Indeed, religio-philosophic ideas such as absoluteness, transcendence, subjectivity, self, truth, Heaven, God, and even the terms religion and philosophy themselves, which have been essential to the development of Western Enlightenment tradition, were conspicuously absent in the articulation of Chinese culture. In order to remove the Deweyan ‘lumber blocking our highways of thought’ it is necessary, as far as cross-cultural awareness goes, to clear away ‘many of the concepts and doctrines that came to comprise the dominant intellectual inventory of Western culture’ (Hall and Ames 1995, xx).

During the ‘age of expansion’, European culture attempted to re-create and resettle itself in all parts of the world, and to ‘spread, transmit, and disseminate [cultural and religious] knowledge, ideas, and information farther and faster’, their goal being to control space and time – a transmission view of communication (Carey 1990, 16-17). In Western culture this transmission view of communication is the most usual view. However, when viewed ritually, as suggested by James Carey (1990) and Eric Rothenbuhler (1998), the links between the manufacture of Confucianism and Western culture become clearer. Western culture moved through the eras of religion as ritual to religion as text and on to the Enlightenment era with its values and ideals such as individuality, rationality, and scientific truth. It ritualized the Western worldview to ‘the degree to which modern rationalism and secularism is expressed in ritualistic communication forms’ (Rothenbuhler 1998, 117). However there is inconsistency and contradiction in this Western view in that ‘rationalism presumes

that the modern West is in a secular age, that religion, ritual and magic are no longer of relevance to important things. But indeed, rationalism has its own religious foundations and ritualistic elements' (Rothenbuhler 1998, 119). The hegemony of Western culture and its Enlightenment ideals usually regards ritual as outside those ideals of rationality and logic. However ritual communication generates its own rationality and logic, and the Western idolization of metaphysics and language, even the terms religion and philosophy themselves, are only examples of what one culture considers to universal and rational. The Enlightened, secular, Protestant modern world 'is a world of taboo, a world of ritual avoidance ...[where] ritual is of no less importance; it is of a different character' (Rothenbuhler 1998, 121).

The common Western view of religion today, and therefore of ancestor worship as a religion, is as a belief based on creed as interpreted in its gospels, codes, and texts, rather than a practice, as a practice definable in terms of modes of behaviour. Prior to the modern era

a medieval peasant's knowledge of biblical history or Church doctrine was...usually very light. The Church was important to him not because of its formalized code of belief, but because its rites were an essential accompaniment to the important events of his own life – birth, marriage and death. ...Religion was a ritual method of living, not a set of dogmas. (Thomas 1972, 76)

This Western view of religion, or the serious part of life, impinges on our views of what is important in Chinese life – it becomes a Western paradigmatic view, and the paradigm most suitable is Confucianism. Just as ritual was recognized by Xunzi and others as important in Chinese culture (see previous chapter), it has also been

important in Western culture, though largely unseen, as the transportation view of communication overrode the ritual understanding. However a ritual definition of communication (Carey 1990, 18) highlights the shared beliefs of Western culture as it [unwittingly] shares its beliefs with China in the form of a Confucian paradigm of understanding Chinese culture. The cultural ideas that the West transmitted found greater reception over time due to the hegemony of the West, and it was these ideas, and indeed the paradigms which bound them, that found their way into Chinese culture – especially the high culture where contact was more prolific. Ideas such as *philosophy* and *culture* gave rise to the concept and authority of Confucianism and its perceived cultural importance, at least within the confines of the elite culture. As noted earlier, the impact of Western thought is not restricted to Westerners, for even the Chinese themselves have consistently utilized Western concepts and analytical frameworks to articulate and inquire into their recent past and present circumstances (Cohen 1984, 1).

The ritual acceptance of the truth and rationality of many Western cultural ideas and ideals leads to argument from false authority. Although many take for granted the *Confucianism-as-Chinese culture* master narrative, a largely unchallenged, conventional, and unverified concept, many sinologists have another view. Around the time of the May Fourth (1919) protests, ancestor worship was seen by some Western observers and academics as

the most vital factor in the religion of China...[and] it continues to hold a position of supreme consequence in the religious and social life of the people. It has been described as ‘the essential religion of China’, ‘the keystone to the arch of China’s

social structure' and 'the most deeply rooted of all forms of religion in the very fibre of the Chinese character'. (Addison 1924, 492)

In more recent times, Benjamin Schwartz, in his influential work, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (1985, 20, 21) wrote that 'the orientation to ancestor worship is so omnipresent and so central to the entire development of Chinese civilization'. Keightly (1990, 44-45) is even firmer in his positive assessment of ancestor worship and his disregard of Confucianism when he maintains that

To the extent that it is possible to speak of one strategic custom or institution in the mix of early China's cultural variables - strategic because of its pervasive ability to sanctify all other aspects of life and to legitimate or and reinforce the lineage - it would seem to be ancestor worship and its social and political corollaries involving hierarchy, ritual deference, obedience, and reciprocity.

To reiterate, the task of understanding Chinese culture is difficult and the problematic should not be underestimated. It is hard work to overcome any Western-centric bias and to understand the dramatically diverging historical pathways between both cultures. For example, Hall and Ames (*Thinking Through Confucius*, 1987), although they previously insisted that Western intellectual traditions were broadly irrelevant in translating cultural concepts (my own sentiments), believe that they can 'hermeneutically... recover the true 'Confucius'. (Jensen 1997, 17), but, as Jensen points out,

...by considering their account of Confucius to be truer than preceding ones, Hall and Ames fall victim to the Anglo-European philosophic paradigm of commensurability

against which Richard Rorty, whom they hold in high regard, has so eloquently written. (Jensen 1997, 17-18)

So like De Bary and Wing-tsit Chan and others, they too fall victim to a lack of awareness of their ideological and ritually understood values of their own culture.

2:4 Conclusion

The beginnings of Confucianism may be found in Confucius' attempt to restore the ideal conditions which he understood could be found in previous times.

Confucius emphasized the priority of practice (ritual/*li*) and this is what was distinctive about early Confucianism as opposed to modern day manufactured Confucianism. Early Confucian teaching did not belong to science, philosophy, or religion. The knowledge Confucius wished to impart 'was not theoretical and abstract but concrete and factual' (Schwartz 1975, 11). As Wang has hermeneutically deduced from his study of *The Great Learning*, 'the priority of practice has nothing to do with the priority of so-called *practical reason* or *practical philosophy*' (Wang 2007, 204).

The priority of practice which Wang attributes to Confucius is ironically the same priority given to practice by me in this thesis – an epistemological priority of practice as ritual over theory, supposition and gospel (in its many forms). My focus is on understanding culture – Confucius and his followers were concerned with continuing that same culture. Victor Turner (1995, 8) could just as well have been referring to Confucius, when he claimed that with 'eyes wide opened to the importance of ritual' he began to see many features of culture that had previously been hidden to view

because of the theoretical blinkers our culture had imposed on him. And he would, I think, have agreed with Monica Wilson (1957, 60) that ‘any analysis not based on some translation of the symbols used by people of that culture is open to suspicion.’ However, he may not have agreed with the orthodox Western intellectual traditions which assert that Confucianism is a philosophy and/or a religion which is implied in its current understanding.

This chapter has not engaged directly in the teleological debates over whether it a philosophy or a religion, as the thesis argument in this part is that Confucianism does *not* equal Chinese culture and that Confucianism is anyway such a misunderstood term as to be of little analytical use. ‘Confucianism as a form of thought, as a way of life, as a spiritual orientation, on the one hand is narrower than Chinese culture, which is a much broader term; but at the same time it is much broader than Chinese culture’ (Tu 1992, 49). Any concerns over whether it is one of the two streams (philosophy or religion) of the Western-centric Enlightenment meta-narrative are mostly irrelevant. The main aim of this chapter is to show that by understanding Chinese culture in this Western-centric way, Chinese culture is misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Chinese culture exhibits a way of thinking that is suspicious of, or at least ignores the supposed power and efficacy of theory – it leans towards the aesthetic and historical, a feature that is common to all schools of thought over China’s long history. This attitude is juxtaposed to a belief in human wisdom gained experientially and historically. Chinese thinking is more concrete, worldly, and practical than its Western counterpart known as philosophy, and if philosophy is thought of as grand

systems of discursive thought as epitomized by Kant or Hegel, as it conventionally is, the idea of a Chinese philosophy is logically awkward and semantically challenging.

If Confucianism finds its roots in ritual, and ritual works by logic of signs with meanings distinct from the logic of rationality, Confucianism's allocation to the category philosophy is questionable. This point is exemplified by an account by Tu Wei-ming (1992, 123) who recalls that 'when at Peking University in 1985, [he] was explicit in telling his class that that he was introducing a foreign cultural subject: Confucian philosophy.'

If not a philosophy, then perhaps Confucianism is religion or at least part of a religion? For many, ritual is action regarding the sacred and the Confucian tradition places a high value on ritual. Ritual becomes the sacred, and the sacred is whatever is treated as the utmost seriousness by the members of that community. In this sense of religion the relation to the category of serious makes Confucianism a religion and according to, Durkheim, the foundation of religious thinking. There is no requirement here for a creator God. Religion as the serious life is a phenomenological category, and as such is easily accepted. The problem however is the transference of meaning from the phenomenological to the divine which occurs as soon as we leave the focus of the subject as phenomenon. As an important construct within the concept of culture, the religion of China, infused as it is with ancestor worship, is a variety of beliefs and practices that depend on no univocal or single text or canon for its inherent logical consistency as a homogenous concept. Chinese thought, though, expressed as it is incongruently in text, has 'explicitly stressed that, while words may help point to the truth, they should never be mistaken for the thing itself' (Jochim 1986, 170).

A major obstacle which hinders the West from understanding China on its own terms involves the seemingly resolute determination of Western culture to impose its 'transcendental pretense' (Solomon 1993). This contradictory intent assumed by Western (Enlightenment) ethnocentrism has scientifically and rationality applied irrationally on the basis that Western cultural values as the universal norms for assessing the value of cultural activity of all other cultures. Confucianism, as a master narrative, symbol, and epistemological key or paradigm for understanding China, contains these Western cultural norms. Confucianism is many things and undoubtedly it is infused with much wisdom. However, it is not the metonym for Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese understand their own culture through a variety of deep and inherent norms related to family, kin, and ancestors.

Chapter 3

Watching the Ancestors: What is Ancestor Worship?

It has long been observed that ancestor worship is much more than just some simple practices and ceremonies for the departed kin – its cultural implications are enormous and considerable. However, why ancestor worship has been important is not at first apparent. This and the following chapters will gradually reveal that the importance lies in its connections; connections to the family; from the family to whole socio-political realm; and to the dominance of this realm in Chinese history. However, in order to gain an understanding of the full significance of ancestor worship, it is first necessary to examine the concrete practices which constitute this phenomenon. ‘No attempt to understand the Chinese can be anything but imperfect without at least a brief description of the ritual practices concerning the departed kin, ancestor worship and ancestor veneration’ (Latourette 1964, 537). Therefore, and ignoring Latourette’s minimum suggestion of brevity, for a continuing better understanding of Chinese culture, a description of these practices is an essential starting point.

3:1 The Chinese practice of ancestor worship

As has been observed by various scholars of classical China, the Chinese concern with ancestor worship has been ubiquitous and essential for the ‘entire development of Chinese civilization’ (Schwartz 1985, 21). ‘The whole pattern of Chinese life and thought was set in the ancient and classical times’ (Harrison 1972, 3). Indeed, according to another scholar, ‘to the extent that it is possible to speak of one strategic custom or institution in the mix of early China’s cultural variables..., it would seem to

be ancestor worship' (Keightley 1990, 44-45). Therefore it is reasonable to assume that to understand Chinese ancestor worship, and therefore Chinese culture, it is necessary to go to the very beginning of its inception.

Although the physical origin of the Chinese people is still much debated and is 'a subject not fully understood' (Roberts 2006, 1), recent research and scholarship has provided a historical picture of much improved clarity from what was known and mythologized in the past. Archaeological evidence such as inscriptions on bronzes and newly excavated Zhou oracle bones fit together with the literary records of ancient places, people, and events long known from the classics and earliest histories. These archaeological discoveries, especially since 1920, have 'broken through the ancient crust of Chinese myth and legend, confirming much of it' (Fairbank 1992, xvii). Archaeological discoveries have revealed a complex picture of early Chinese development, where several regional cultures almost simultaneously achieved the transition from food gathering to food production and did not originate, as was once thought, in one area of the North China Plain (Roberts 2006, 2; Eberhard 1950, 10).

Due to the 'remarkable continuity of post-Neolithic cultural development in China...it is probably truer for China than for most parts of the world that as the Neolithic twig was bent the modern tree has inclined' (Keightly 1990, 22). 'Certainly by 2000B.C. very many of the features we think of as typically Chinese were already in evidence' (Milston 1978, 45). It is China's remarkable cultural continuity that makes it imperative to study China's past, even when considering China's present. 'Distinctive features of Chinese life today, such as autocratic government, come down directly

from prehistoric times' (Fairbank 1992, 29) and there is no doubt that the early history of China is of crucial relevance in any understanding of China.

Over 10,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic period China, the climatic conditions were favourable to the development of early Chinese culture. 'At some point, probably still in the Neolithic, the commemoration of the dead - a feature common to many early cultures, including the Greek and Mesopotamian - probably became more orderly and articulated in China, taking on an ideological and juridical power of its own' (Keightly 1990, 45). The Neolithic Chinese spent much of their time and effort in burying their dead and maintaining them after death. The dead were set apart in what looks like kinship groupings; they were worshipped, being the subject of religious-like practices and oracle bone divination. 'The presence of some of these "oracle bones" in cemetery areas suggests that the living, by cracking oracle bones, were attempting to communicate with the dead' (Keightly 1990, 23). Evidence from the late Neolithic period suggests that the community invested enormous amounts of their energy on tombs, coffins and other artifacts buried with the ancestors.

Neolithic China ranged from the 'Yangshao culture of the middle Yellow river, the Dawenkou culture in Shandong, the Majiabang culture of the lower Yangzi River, and the Dapenkeng culture along the south coast and Taiwan' (Roberts 2006, 2). During the Yangshao period, 5000-3000BC, in the northwest and central plains, the practice of collective secondary burial thrived. Chang Kwang-chih (1968, 103) reports that 'the probable lineage arrangement in the village cemetery ...makes it highly probable that the cult of the ancestors ...had already been initiated' during this period.

Although collective secondary burial was never a dominant practice, it is nevertheless revealing as it implies not only the will and the ability for what must have been a large mobilization of labour for such an intensive task, (there were ‘up to seventy or eighty skeletons in one pit’), but also implies that the ‘dead must have been kept alive in the minds of their survivors during the period of months, if not years, between the primary and secondary burial’ (Keightly 1990, 24).

The favourable conditions of the Neolithic in China led to the establishment and continuing development of many villages and eventually to the development of the Bronze Age capital cities of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, the Three Dynasties. The transition from the Neolithic villages to the Bronze Age cities should be seen ‘as successive phases of a single cultural development’ with a high degree of cultural homogeneity and continuity (Fairbank 1992, 35). This continuity of culture, mentioned in the introduction, and argued throughout, is the cultural ‘web of significance’, the *significants*, being the ‘plans, recipes, rules, or instructions’ for the regulation and control of behaviour.

The picture of ancient China as was once understood, especially by the readings and interpretations of the Classics and ancient Chinese histories, is now considered incorrect. The three ancient dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, were not only centred in three different areas, but also appear to have co-existed (Fairbank 1992, 35; Milston 1978, 56). Prior to that period and during the times traditionally attributed to the reign of the sage-kings Yao and Shun, from the late Neolithic (2600-2100 BC), a culture ‘centring on sacrifices to natural and ancestral spirits’ gradually assimilated with other cultural communities, heralding the first Bronze Age dynasty of the Xia

(Cheng 2001, 497-498). This transition from the numerous Neolithic villages to the cities of the Three Dynasties was a smooth transition and ‘a single cultural development’ (Fairbank 1992, 35). Interaction among these Neolithic farming villages, (numbering in excess of one thousand), resulted in kinship networks and other associations, which gradually provided the conditions for regional centralized political control. ‘Family lineages, derived from large tribal clans, each set up their separate walled towns’ (Fairbank 1992, 37).

During the Three Dynasties, a fluid and dynamic situation developed where prominent clans jostled with each other for influence over other clans and villages. This clan-based socio-political dynamic ‘is a prominent feature of the ancient Chinese state’. Another important socio-political feature of ancient China, from the family, clan, village to city and state, is that they became highly stratified along genealogical lines. The lineage system of ancient China, due to lack of sufficient data, is not fully understood, but what is not doubted is that ‘political status was genealogically determined’ (Chang, K. C. 1983, 16). The link between genealogy, and by inference the ancestors, to politics is well exemplified by the development of Chinese towns. The thousands of towns that dotted the Three Dynasties political landscape were linked together – by invisible lines as it were – into hierarchical systems of administrative control and wealth distribution, and the town hierarchies largely coincided with the hierarchies of clans and lineages (Chang, K. C. 1983, 25). These towns, underpinned socially and culturally by their ancestral relations, were ‘above all a political nucleus.’ They were not ‘a spontaneous accumulation of population or capital or facilities of production’. They were merely a sum-total of individuals, each

of whom was closely linked with the village from which the family originated and where its ancestral clan temple stood (Needham 1971, 71).

These thousands of small networked towns over time gradually formed larger political units ‘through the process of continual subjugation’ (Chang, K. C. 1983, 25). The states of Xia, Shang, and Zhou were the most important but they were not the sole political power. John K. Fairbank (1992, 39) gives an account of this process and some idea of the number of towns at this time when he writes that the ‘Zhou of the Wei River valley became strong enough to conquer the Shang in warfare in about 1040BC. Each side mobilized from seven to eight hundred villages or petty “states”.’

The Bronze Age rulers, indicating the importance of and reflecting the social realm, were, besides political rulers, also religious leaders. However this social-religious connection was not restricted to the elite or to royalty. ‘The worship of his ancestors is also a part of the state ceremonial, but in performing this the sovereign does not stand alone - the worship of their forefathers has always been the practice of all the Chinese people’ (Legge 1880, 69). Due to the many restrictions and proscriptions concerning the worship of ancestors on the correct performance of rituals imposed by the Confucian texts, it is often supposed that this was actually the historical case. However, ‘as centuries passed and the numerous states which followed the Shang period were absorbed into a unified empire, the formerly aristocratic practice of ancestor worship spread downwards among the common people’ (Milston 1978, 56). Since those ancient times, ancestor worship was practiced by much of the population of China, and it has remained an essential part of Chinese religious practice [and culture] until modern times (Roberts 2006, 7).

As the ultimate interest of this thesis is an understanding Chinese culture, it is important to notice the cultural homogeneity of the ancient Chinese and the smooth transition from the Neolithic to what seemed like a timeless traditional culture. This cultural homogeneity, ‘contrasts remarkably with the multiplicity and diversity of peoples, states, and cultures in the ancient Middle East’ (Fairbank 1992, 40). The early Mesopotamian cultures, the cradle of Western civilization, clashed continuously for thousands of years in a flux of Middle Eastern warfare and politics – ‘the contrast with ancient China could not have been greater’ (Fairbank 1992, 41). The Chinese, due to the effectiveness of their culturally formed socio-political institutions and methods, and feeling comfortable with their cultural position in relation to other peoples and cultures on their periphery, found themselves assimilating others more so than dominating them through military conquest – harmony was more important than dominance. Furthermore, China’s geographic isolation added to the mix of conditions that enabled cultural and political unity. The archaeological discoveries of the last two decades are not only enough to remind us that China is the oldest continuous civilization in existence, but they also indicate that during the formative stages of development it was a world apart, cut off geographically from other early centres of civilization (Cotterell 1988, xiii).

By the end of the beginning of the Iron Age (600-500B.C.) and the start of the (text-evidential) age marked by Classical literature, ‘the Chinese people had already achieved a degree of cultural homogeneity and isolated community hard to match elsewhere in the world’ (Fairbank 1992, 45). Chinese culture was already and would continue to be, a culture dominated by the socio-political. The commercial, military,

religious, and artistic realms, often dominant in other cultures, found themselves subordinate to the socio-political realm – the realm structured around the family, its heirs, and especially its antecedents. Fairbank (1992, 45) has a view of this situation closer to my own with his use of the term *culturalism* in the quote below, when he says:

It would be an error for us today, so long accustomed to the modern sentiment of nationalism, to imagine ancient China as an embryonic nation-state. We would do better to apply the idea of culturalism and see ancient China as a complete civilization comparable to Western Christendom, within which nation-states like France and England became political sub-units that shared their common European culture.
(Fairbank 1992, 45)

The important point I want to make here is that ancestor worship played a pivotal role, both in the development of the political sphere in China, and also by promoting the socio-political to sphere to eminence. David Keightly (1990, 31) hypothesizes that ancient Chinese ancestor worship provided the conditions and impetus for the ‘hierarchical, proto-bureaucratic conceptions’ of the Bronze Age Chinese, and for ‘more secular forms of government [that] replaced the Bronze Age theocracy’. The patrimonial-theocratic state gradually transformed into a more secular institution during the Neolithic-Bronze Age transition (Fairbank 1992, 39), but the importance of the ancestors never waned. The Chinese state, as it might be recognized politically today, finally comes into view with the emergence of the Zhou Dynasty; however its political culture had developed long ago.

Here, in the embryonic period of Chinese culture, can be found the connections and correlations between ancestor worship, and the well recognized juxtaposition of the family (writ large) and with the political realm – a social-political nexus, almost unconsciously centering on ancestor worship. My goal in this section is to emphasise the connections between the Chinese practice of ancestor worship and the Chinese social and political realms. It is also a strategic goal which attempts to stress the high value placed upon the political and social realms, and to show their intrinsic correlations, both with each other and with ancestor worship.

3:2 Who were the ancestors?

It has been established that ancestor worship has been practiced in China from ancient times. However, ‘who was worshipping whom’ is not as clear as it first seems. That is, what exactly is meant by the word *ancestor* in the term, and indeed the act of ancestor worship? This question concerns not only the ancient understanding of the term, but also its pre-modern and modern understanding. From the time of Confucius, when he is quoted in the *Analects* (2: 24) as saying that ‘to sacrifice to ancestors not one’s own is considered presumptuous’ (Waley 1996, 23), to De Groot, who wrote that there is ‘a prevailing social rule which forbids their contributing in any way to other people’s ancestral sacrifices’ (Baker 1979, 76), the term *ancestor worship* has been clearly distinguished from merely the *worship of the dead*. ‘Other people’s dead were of little concern: the only dead to be worshipped were one’s own dead, one’s ancestors’ (Baker 1979, 75).

Early ancestor worship, from about 4500BC, was of the group type, ‘probably conducted on behalf of and for the common interests of the entire community’. Later, around c.2600-2000BC, it moved towards worship of individuals (Li 1999, 602). To be sure, the term *ancestor worship* should be distinguished from just the worship of the dead, but the distinguishing features are more nuanced and ones of emphasis and not of delineation. When considering ancestor worship in its wide historical and social scope as this work does, it is apparent that the answer to the question, ‘who were the ancestors?’ is a complex and complicated matter of significance.

This complexity is significant in two ways: on the one hand it is significant due to the interrelationship between ancestor worship and every other important aspect of Chinese culture and society; and on the other hand the complexity of ancestor worship should be understood as the complexity of certain customs and manners at particular times and places which fall within the greater understanding or phenomenon of ancestor worship in its overarching cultural role. Who was worshipped, and which ancestor was worshipped, was a matter of local custom and present circumstance. What was not a matter of custom and local circumstance was that the ancestors were always, to a greater or lesser degree, worshipped. Besides the regional variations of concepts of Chinese ancestors and patterns of ancestral worship, these concepts and patterns of worship have been subject to change throughout history, most often relating to general historical socio-political transformations.

3.2.1 Ancestors: an historical view

There are many regional and historical variations as will be seen from the outline provided below. Li Liu (1999, 603) has suggested four types of ancestors in ancient

China, from the apparently egalitarian group to the individual within a stratified society. During the Neolithic period, a period of about 10,000 years, the ritual changed from group ancestor worship to individual ancestor worship, and parallel to this, indicating its close relationship with the socio-political aspects of the culture, was the transition of social organization from non-stratified to stratified. Neolithic ritual practices were not static and the types of ancestors and the way they were worshipped were modified over time.

The first type described by Liu is the group-ancestor worship of the Yangshao culture (c. 4500-4200 BC). The ancestors were probably communal ancestors, belonging and advantageous to the entire community. Some secondary burial sites, also at Yangshao (c. 4300-4000 BC), are examples of the second type, distinguished by their exclusion of females from the community of ancestors. A noticeable transition occurred around 2500-2300BC at Yangshan when worship of individuals was first identified.

‘Although economically unstratified’ (Liu 1999, 604), this third type of ancestors constituted most probably important religious or military men who ‘continuously received ritual offerings for many years’. In the fourth type of ancestor worship (and by inference ancestor) identified by Liu, as observed at Longshan culture sites (c. 2600-2000 BC), we see the culmination of transition from group to individual worship, from the early Neolithic flat social system to a stratified and hierarchical bronze age social system. The latter form of this ritual practice seems to have deeply influenced the religious and political systems of the Shang dynasty (and probably the Xia’s – but empirical evidence is scarce)..

The Shang put an enormous effort into their worship of the ancestors. The ancestral tombs were rectangular pits accessed by ramps and steps leading down to the burial chamber where the coffin was situated. Surrounding the coffin were many ornate objects of pottery and bronze, such as eating utensils, 'weapons, helmets, masks and ornaments, carved objects in jade, bone ivory and stone, musical instruments, oracle bones and shells with inscriptions' (Milston 1978, 50).

The Shang people regarded sacrificial rituals as a crucial part of life. One relatively recent study found that eighteen different kinds of offerings were made in a single year. The performance of all these rites occupied 110 days out of each year. In the rites, offerings were most frequently made to ancestors. (Fu 2003, 638)

By the end of the Shang period, around 1100 BC, many cultural *significants* were already in place. There was one dominant *significant* and that was ancestor worship, 'with the accompanying practice of divination by scapulamancy (bones) and plastrumancy (tortoise shells), and the emphasis on family continuity, family status and family hierarchy' (Milston 1978, 68). Becoming highly hierarchical and institutionalized, ancestral-worship and its associated symbols and rituals, provided the ideological basis and legitimacy for the political authority of the ancient ruling elite and for the socio-political structures of China throughout its history.

Another type of ancestor is the ancestor who may be considered to be legendary or historical. Liu (1999, 603) views these legendary and historical ancestors as separate categories; however it is sufficient here to treat them as one under the rubric of 'legendary'. Legendary ancestors take on a more symbolic role and both underpin and provide legitimacy for the socio-political system or the larger community, ranging

from the lineage to the nation or state. Although less personal than one's own direct ancestors, they were still one's ancestors connected through history and legend. These legendary ancestors had a moral supremacy over other types of ancestors even though they might not be blood-related, and quite often filled the supreme position in the hierarchy of ancestors. This position is important and must be filled if the ancestral realm is to mirror the social realm – and it must. The creation and acceptance of legendary ancestors was a culturally significant socio-political strategy.

According to the *Laws of Sacrifice* in the *Li Ji*, the worship of these departed great ancestors was intended for, 'those who had died in the diligent discharge of their duties, those whose toils had established states, and those who had warded off or given succour in great calamities' (Legge 1880, 88). The sacrifices to legendary (and historical) ancestors also included the worship of natural features and forces such as mountains, forests, rivers, and valleys, and of cosmological phenomena, although 'the worship was really paid to the [ancestral] spirits presiding over them (Legge 1880, 88). Most important in this category are the legendary and historical ancestors of the Neolithic age – they are culture heroes. The significance placed upon these culture heroes is most evident in the classical accounts provided by the writers of the late Zhou period and during the Han dynasty.

One of the most prominent of these early culture heroes and legendary ancestors was Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, who, according to the *Li Chi*, reigned from 2697 BC to 2598 BC, and to whom is credited a number of important inventions (Chang, K. C. 1983, 42). The conception of the Yellow Emperor was usually that he was a compassionate and ethical ruler, a defender of the people, and the person to whom the

invention of writing is credited. He was not, though, as is now customarily viewed, the common ancestor of the Han people or of the nation-state of China. In the past many deities and ancestral heroes were worshipped and he was probably treated as just another one of the many but powerful deities and legendary ancestors. Dynastic rulers, Han or non-Han, such as the Mongols and the Manchus worshipped the Yellow Emperor but did not recognize him as their ancestor. Today however, 'his status has soared...and he is now regarded [by many] as the common ancestor of all Chinese people, including non-Han ethnic groups' (Li 1999, 605).

The Yellow Emperor and other historical and legendary ancestors play an important role as part of a broader conception of 'ancestor worship – the big picture' and in the still broader conception that is Chinese culture. They are 'The Great Ancestors [who] are watching' (Sheils 1980, 247) and as such are 'able to influence the entire population of a society and not simply their own descendents'. Besides the Yellow Emperor, the Emperors Yao and Shun, along with the founder of the Xia dynasty, Emperor Yu, were among the throng of legendary ancestors receiving worship. It is with the reign of Yu and with knowledge of the Xia, however scant that might be, that legend merges with history.

3:2:2 Ancestors: an anthropological view

The view so far of the ancestors has been one seen through the lens of history looking at their ancient beginnings and their inevitable continuation. It has provided some depth to our understanding of what worshippers were doing and who they were doing it to. There are many drawbacks in this type of view, none more so than the

(relatively) limited amount of evidence that provides such a view. However, other evidence is available which enables us to achieve a picture or view of much more clarity. Chinese culture as we have already established is a culture of continuity of tradition, and as we will continually highlight, the important strands, streams, or *significants* continue over time. So with this in mind, we now turn to anthropological studies as a means of providing clearer and more insightful views of ancestor worship. Although these views necessarily depict life and culture as observed today or only in the more recent past (anthropology is a young discipline), they show a continuing culture in its ever evolving, but paradoxically unchanging form – that is, just as the stream continuously flows, and is therefore seen to change, it is nevertheless, the same stream.

Maurice Freedman (1979, 274), in *The Study of Chinese Society*, suggests a way to delineate various types of ancestors which is different from those above and which gives more emphasis to where the ancestor was worshipped. ‘Little was achieved in the study of Chinese ancestor worship’ he remarks, ‘until it was made clear that there are two distinct kinds of worshipped ancestors: domestic and extra-domestic; private and (quasi) public.’ This influential approach to the taxonomy of ancestors is important and it is dealt with below in more detail. However it is sufficient to say now that what he means with this typology is that the ancestor worshiped at home and the ancestor worshiped in the clan or lineage hall have to be understood and treated differently. It is equally important however, that these two categories themselves are subject to further differences in locale and in time, although perhaps to a lesser degree, and are themselves further delineated.

Sheils (1975, 427, 429) is perhaps saying something similar when he rebukes most research in this area for its 'tendency to lump varieties of ancestor worship in a single category'. He proposes another 'taxonomy of ancestor worship based on intensity of involvement of the ancestors with the living'. His categorization is sociological and he provides the categories of 'descent, conjugal formation, and marriage type as the major factors in the rise of ancestor worship'. Shiels' concern with ancestor worship is however more of a universal nature. While there may be merit in such a general taxonomy of ancestor worship, its efficacy is tied to the understanding of ancestor worship as a universal phenomenon. The more specific and particular understanding of Chinese ancestor worship required for this and similar studies is usually dealt with in other ways by Sinologists and others concerned with Chinese ancestor worship.

Francis Hsu's (1971, 244) important 1942 West Town (Yunnan) study provides another variation of ancestor types. Referring to the spirits worshipped he finds four types, although only the first type actually represents ancestors in the meaning as it is used here. These types are: (1) spirits of members of the same kinship group and of the group of relatives by marriage; (2) spirits of persons not related by kinship or marriage; (3) officials and functionaries in the world of the spirits; and, (4) spirits of dead persons from unknown or unfamiliar racial or cultural groups (such as Muslims).

The first type of ancestors/spirits is obviously the most dominant and what is generally regarded by worshippers as their own ancestors, unlike the other three types. Hsu's informants agreed that 'these ancestors were always well disposed and never malicious toward the members of the family to which they are related. In fact, the question does not arise at all.' However, some reports in other studies (Ahern 1973)

suggest that the ancestors could be malevolent, though this finding is not common. Freedman (1979, 303) represents the majority when he writes, 'While they will certainly punish their descendents...they are essentially benign and considerate.' The second type, those spirits who are not related by birth or marriage, may be dangerous under certain circumstances, though their exact position in the spiritual hierarchy is unclear, as is the third group, and the last group are rarely even considered.

One study in Yunnan south China (Hsu 1971, 285) states that even though 'no assumption is made that West Town culture is identical with that in other parts of China', and that there indeed some distinguishing features, it nevertheless matches other studies by the author and is corroborated by other research. This problem of the relation of the universal or general to the particular is engaged with by Qian Mu (see below), but is also a matter of interest throughout the thesis. Hsu importantly emphasises the correspondence between the dead and the living when he writes that 'the attitude of the dead toward the living is completely in line with that of the living toward the dead' (1971, 245). We have already encountered this correspondence on a wider social level between ancestor worship and the broad socio-political situation as seen at any one time or place – the way the ancestors were worshipped and the importance placed upon this practice were mirrored in the society at large. As the worship became more hierarchical so did the society and as the rituals to the ancestors remained significant, this social realm continued and predominated throughout Chinese history and the long tradition of Chinese culture. Although a link between the family (*jia*) and its descent group (*jiazu*) to the 'people's descent group' (*minzu*) is by extension commonly made, it is important to recognize that the primary source is the family, the close relatives and the descendents.

Another important distinction is made by Francis Hsu concerning ancestor worship as it might be seen as religious in a similar or comparable way with the general and stereotypical Western view of religion. The Chinese, according to Hsu, ‘deduce the existence of the world of the spirits from the existence of the world of the living, but not vice versa as in Christianity’ (Hsu 1971, 246). To worship the ancestors, at least as he found it in West Town, is not a matter of belief, for to believe means to entertain the possibility of non-belief, and in West Town this is not the case. Ancestor worship is a normative behaviour accepted by all – it is a fact – a fact that ‘no sane West Towner ever challenged’ (Hsu 1971, 244), not just a matter of belief.

If religion were defined by the more or less explicit adherence by individuals to a dogma, and their more or less great respect for clergy, it would be equally false to say the Chinese practise two or three religions or that they practise one. Indeed, in China there exist as almost definite beliefs only those about Ancestors, and if anyone deserves the title of priest, it is a layman: the paterfamilias. (Granet 1975, 146)

3:3 What is ‘practising ancestor worship’?

So far we have addressed the question, ‘who were the ancestors?’ Now we turn our attention to what we would see if we were to observe someone worshipping his or her ancestor/s? Of course, given the above account, in response to this question we might also ask at what time and place they were worshipping and to what kind or type of ancestor? So already we can expect to find some regional and historical variations and some variations in regard to what type of ancestor – domestic or extra domestic, actual (historic) or legendary, personal or communal, and so on.

However, for our purposes it is not so important to provide a picture for each instance. First, although we have evidence for the thousands of years prior to historical written records, and while it shows some forms of ancestor worship, it does not give us a clear picture of what the worshipper might actually have been doing or practising. Much of the evidence concerns just the elite and a limited number of ceremonies around their activities. We do not know with any degree of clarity precisely how the rest of ancient Chinese society worshipped, nor indeed how the elite worshipped on a daily or regular basis, although there are many Confucian or classical texts which prescribe the correct practices. By the time of the Han dynasty, what 'the people were already actually doing and believing far exceeded what state-supported ritual texts prescribed' (Overmeyer 1995, 3). However, from the Imperial times onward there is sufficient textual evidence to indicate that the rituals of ancestor worship have, by and large, occurred in such a similar way over this entire period for any variations to be just that, variations on an important, but necessarily generalized, cultural phenomenon.

Such a cursory denial of the importance of actual and historical detail, even at a very general level such as I propose, will disturb many anthropologists and, to a lesser extent, some historians. However, this level of generalization is not meant to lean towards vagueness, but to lean towards inclusion. The primary function of this thesis is to eventually provide a better understanding of Chinese culture, a culture that must necessarily encompass and include all the variations of ancestor worship. Qian Mu (1894-1991) has another way of expressing this approach. Qian uses the Chinese term *li* to mean rites or propriety. Although *li* is not the same as ancestor practice as such, for our purposes at this stage it is sufficient to see it as a close relationship and nearly

synonymous. The early meaning of *li* concerned its use as a term for religious rites (Cua 2003, 370). It related to not only ritual performance, but also proper conduct and the ethical reasoning behind this conduct. These religious rituals, *li*, are inextricably linked to the worship of ancestors and to the ‘principles which regulate or group life, and particularly the life of kinship groups’ (Liu 1959, 68).

The relationship between ancestor worship and *li* as rites or ritual is dealt with more comprehensively in the chapter (six) on ritual. However it is timely here to present parts of Qian Mu’s *Lesson in Chinese Culture* at length, as it cleverly and succinctly links the universal with the particular, and the particular customs of ancestor worship with Chinese culture.

For a Westerner, culture is bound to place, so that local customs and language serve to distinguish cultures. For a Chinese, culture is universal, so that languages and local customs only serve to distinguish place. To understand the difference, you need to understand the concept of *li*¹³, “rites” or “propriety.”

There are no Western language equivalents for the word *li*. It is a general concept that applies to standards of customary behaviour throughout the Chinese world and distinguishes Chinese culture from all others. Because Western cultures have no *li*, you distinguish among them by measuring the differences between fengsu, “local customs,” as if a Chinese culture were the sum total of the customs practised in that area of influence. If you set out to observe local customs in China, you will find that they vary greatly from place to place...The [local customs or ‘small’ cultural] differences from one end of the country to the other are much greater. But the *li* are

the same. By the same token, the *li* that are the standards for the family – its internal relations, its external relations, birth, marriage, death – are equivalent to the *li* that are standards for the workings of government and state ceremonies – internal relations, relations between state and society, recruitment, treaties, successions. This is the only way to understand Chinese culture. It is different from customary practice.

...If you want to understand the culture, you need to raise your sights until you reach the heart and mind. The heart and mind of China is the *li*. (in Dennerline 1988, 8-10)

So while I am now going to describe the customary practice of ancestor worship, it is done in such a way as to be general enough so that customary practice, different as it is from 'Chinese culture', nevertheless acts as a conduit towards such an understanding. I also take into account Fairbank's (1992, 14) view that in spite of the immensity and variety of the Chinese scene, this sub-continent has remained a single political unit, [and a single cultural unit] where Europe has not, [and that China] is held together by a way of life and a system of government much more deeply rooted than our own, and stretching further back uninterruptedly into the past.

The traditional way the Chinese worshipped their ancestors is presented below as though it was unchanging and permanent. Of course such a presentation is a distortion in that it occurred differently in different places and at different times, but it is a useful and necessary generalization for the purposes required here and in any broad cultural view of this sort. For instance the use of ancestral halls was not common until the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (Baker 1979, 175), and lineage organization is usually stronger and of a slightly different construction in south China as compared to north China (Freedman 1971, 1; Baker, 1979, 65).

Freedman (1965, 1) found that nearly everywhere in China, although most pronounced in the southeast, 'lineage and village tended markedly to coincide, so that many villages consisted of a single lineage.' Here, burial grounds had immense symbolic importance for the lineage. However, Myron Cohen (1990, 513) found that in 'Yangmansa and north China generally the common graveyards of lineages contrasted with the dispersed burials characteristic of much of south China.' North China cemeteries provided a genealogical focus which in Guangdong, Fujian, and Taiwan was furnished by ancestral tablets placed in homes or ancestral temples.

Adding to these differences, James Thayer Addison (1924, 493) found that 'in some parts of the country there are two tablets' (Addison, 1924, 493), and Cohen found that in north China 'ancestral tablets tended to be found in better-off households, while most families had ancestral scrolls' (Cohen 1990, 516). The significance of the ancestral tablets, both in ritual and in social representation, were found to be remarkably different in north China from those in south-eastern China.

The frequency of rituals concerning the tablets was also an area of localized difference.

In contrast to the practices reported for south-eastern mainland China and Taiwan, where tablets were in permanent display in homes or ancestral halls, tablets and scrolls in Yangmansa were kept under wraps for nearly the entire year by the families owning them. They were brought out – the scrolls unrolled and displayed on a wall – for only a three day period at [New Year]. (Cohen 1990, 516)

Patricia Ebrey (1984, 211) expresses an earlier view of how these practices may have changed over time, when she writes that until the Song period (960-1279) government officials were not concerned with the religious and family life of the commoners. However during Song dynasty times what were seen as uncanonical Confucian funeral rites ‘were outlawed or otherwise discouraged by the government.’ They were also obliged to rewrite new guides for practice of rites that included and linked the contemporary Song practices with those of the classical period. For instance, ‘in Song times graves had become a major focus of ancestor worship, [even by the Literati], as actually practised’. However, there was no canonical basis for such graveside rites. This was changed by Imperial government on the grounds that ‘this was the only place that commoners could perform ancestral rites’ and by Cheng Yi (1033-1107) who argued that:

rites at graves were an expression of filial piety and that commoners should be able to worship as many generations of ancestors as officials. This position was reiterated by Chu Hsi (1130-1200), the most important intellectual figure of the period, who included these revisions in his highly influential guide to the performance of family rites. (Ebrey 1984, 211)

Chinese kinship organization and their related family and ancestral practices differ from region to region and also change over time. Although they have a ‘complex history that is just beginning to be mapped out’ (Fairbank 1992, 20), they will be presented here as the more general case. It is not the task here to do that mapping, and statements made about the particular case, should only be seen as parts of the geo-historical mosaic. David Jordan’s (1972, 93, 97) study in a Taiwanese village, as an example, reveals that ‘every house (not necessarily every family individually) has a

family altar’ and that ‘Chinese ancestors are not moralistic arbiters of their descendents behaviour.’ Here, as in most examples, the particular merges with the general.

In another example of difference, Arthur Wolf (1974, 131) describes the practices ‘in the rural areas along the southwestern edge of the Taipei Basin, where ‘conservative families burn three sticks of incense every morning and every evening.’ He then infers from his study that, ‘all people worship the same gods just as they live under the same government’, and ‘whether a particular spirit is viewed as a ghost or an ancestor depends on the point of view of a particular person. One man’s ancestor is another man’s ghost (Wolf 1974, 146).’ ‘Ordinarily, however, the ancestors were thought to be benevolent’ (Eastman 1988, 47). Francis Hsu (1971, 45) sees the ancestors in a positive manner, where not only are they benevolent, but they do not punish at all, whereas Emily Ahern (1973, 199-200), on the other hand, challenges the view that the ancestors are ‘essentially benign’. While we know that ancestor worship varied over time and location, we also know that it has been universal in Chinese culture. In order to begin to gain a full appreciation of the practice it is necessary and desirable to describe the phenomenal aspects of the main ways the ancestors have been worshipped.

3:3:1 Grave based worship

There are three main places where ancestors reside and where they may be worshipped – the graveyard, the domestic family shrine, and the clan or lineage temple or ancestral hall. ‘A “good” graveyard is the concern of every family, rich or

poor... A proper graveyard is just as essential to the family as a proper house' (Hsu 1971, 41). Grave based ancestor worship has been practised since the Neolithic period, where group/community worship mirrored the social structure. Ebrey (1990, 201) writes that 'by the Han Dynasty ancestor worship and elaborate funerals and burials were widely practised among the upper class and were also of some importance among common farmers'.

Although much of the classical literature proscribed commoners from sacrificing to the ancestors at any place, visiting and worshiping at graves, even by the literati, was an important part of ancestor worship. Eventually the custom of visiting graves and worshiping ancestors there became so entrenched that they received government approval and renowned scholars such as Cheng Yi and Chu Hsi included grave site worshiping in their writings about 'proper conduct' and about rites and rituals conducted there (Ebrey 1990, 211). This worship included such actions as cleaning and repairing graves and tombs, showing reverence by doing prostrations, sharing meals with the ancestors, lighting incense, and burning paper money, 'but not paper horses, carriages or houses, [in West Town] as in other parts of China' (Hsu 1971, 158). Baker, (1979, 86), referring to more recent Imperial times, informs us that 'the ancestor could be worshipped wherever his remains were, regardless of the stage of burial, whether in unburied coffin, temporary grave, urn or permanent grave.'

Grave based worship has become increasingly popular in recent years. One example of this increasing popularity comes from Shanghai where it is reported (*Peoples Daily* 01/04/2004) that:

The number of people in [Shanghai] expected to mark Qingming, a traditional festival for mourning beloved dead ones, is a sign that the Chinese patrilineal clan culture and tradition of ancestry worshiping may be making a comeback. 6.46 million in Shanghai – an increase of 6 percent. Shanghai people now attach more importance to family bonds despite quick economic development.

During Qingming (the Clear and Bright festival), held early in April, the family, (clan, lineage) became mobilized as a ritual group. Worshippers would ensure that the graves were rebuilt with fresh earth and tidied up, and they would tie white paper streamers to the graves to indicate that the dead were in fact being remembered. ‘Incense was offered, ritual paper money burned, fire crackers set off, and those participating prostrated themselves in front of the graves’ (Cohen 1990, 521).

3:3:2 Domestic ancestor worship

An ancestor could be worshiped in a number of places, although where the ancestor went after death, or how he (or his soul) could be in more than one place at any one time was probably not even considered by most Chinese (Baker 1979, 84) [and indeed it never bothered their intellectuals to the degree that it did in the West]. The Chinese, according to Ebrey (1990, 211) who found them more precise in these matters, believed that not only did a person have a soul which was based in the body, but there was also a soul which separated from the body and ‘went everywhere’. This ‘everywhere’ soul resided most often, among other places, in ‘an “ancestor tablet” in the home and was of the utmost importance in ancestor worship’ (Baker 1979, 86).

The fact that the soul resides in the tablet does not, of course, involve the belief that it is confined to the tablet. A common belief in China today is that each man has three souls [the grave, the tablet and the other world]... the doctrine arose to account for the fact that all these ceremonies were equally customary and yet logically contradictory. (Addison 1924, 495)

Usually each ancestor is represented by a wooden tablet with their name and age inscribed upon it.

Other characters on the tablet show the date and hour of the person's birth, as well as the direction according to geomancy of his or her tomb. These tablets are either housed in single wooden pavilions or in double husband-wife pavilions. The tablets of dear ones are often specially decorated with coloured silk. These tablets are arranged in order. In front of them are always offerings of dishes of food, incense tripods, candlesticks, and a vase or fresh or artificial flowers. (Hsu 1971, 50)

The tablets and other associated other ritual paraphernalia constituted an altar, and 'every house has an altar in its main hall' (Freedman 1979, 275) or it was 'placed in such a position that it overlooked much of the life that went on there, a permanent presence watching over the doings of its descendants' (Baker 1979, 86). Domestic ancestor worship was of the utmost importance because the ancestor watched over the household while the household watched the ancestor, in that the ancestor was constantly in the mind of those in the household – they were always aware of their ancestors' presence – when they practised any kind of ritual they were practising what a Buddhist might refer to as 'mindfulness practice'. These ritual included daily 'offering of tea or food, the burning of incense, and the burning of a (an eternal) light'

(Baker 1979, 86). Ancestors were presented offerings as venerated members of the family (Eastman 1988, 48). In West Town food is only offered at special occasions (Hsu 1971, 184). Just who was worshipped varied according to 'the occasion, the locality, and the family...The forms of Chinese ancestor worship are simple, for the rites constitute a family meal in which the dead share' (Addison 1924, 497).

The domestic worship, at least the daily rituals, was usually the concern of the women; however, on more significant occasions the men would most likely officiate. 'There were no priests, and ancestors could only be worshipped by their own descendents, and the simple rites required no great ritual expertise' (Baker 1979, 88). But this does not mean they were neglected by the men at other times. The ancestors participated and were concerned with all major family and household events of each individual. Each household has a family shrine where the ancestors are represented either in a large scroll or on separate tablets. 'There was not one corner in this vast land of China where one did not find temples, shrines, altars, and other places of worship' (Yang, C. K. 1967, 6), yet it was the traditional Chinese home that was most important place of worship, 'for it contained spirit tablets of the ancestors, and pictures and idols of many household deities' (Yang, C. K. 1967 16). They often shared this shrine with a number of gods and deities, who also share in any offerings of incense or food. In West Town, 'The popular gods in all family shrines are three: Kuan Kung (the warrior from the Three Kingdoms), Confucius, and one or more Buddhas... In addition, there are often other spiritual figures in family shrines which the family members cannot identify' (Hsu 1971, 51).

Besides the usual set days of ritualised worship, there were also other occasions when formal announcements were made to the ancestors. These announcements take place on any occasion of importance in the life of the family, such as births and birthdays, weddings, and occasions of success for members of the family. Other family rituals were also of great concern to the ancestors. 'The joint worship of ancestors by bride and groom is the critical point of the marriage rite, and actually determines its validity for purposes of legal decisions' (Addison 1924, 498).

3:3:3 Ancestor worship and larger kin groups

Although it may appear otherwise, 'the Chinese have never overburdened themselves with ancestors' (Freedman, 1979: 277). Once the family shrine had accumulated too many ancestors (tablets) the oldest and least remembered would be ceremoniously disposed of – usually by burning or by moving to a clan or lineage hall or temple.

Although the majority of ancestor rituals were performed privately within the home, 'public religious observances...were a prominent feature of Chinese social life' (Eastman 1988, 49). Ancestor worship in ancestral halls and clan temples provide, ideally, the same outcomes as ancestor worship in the homes, except that the home-based worship is restricted to ancestors whose descendants within the house have a common great-great-grandparent – that is *wu fu*: five generations. The ideal however, rarely matched the practice. Some family shrines retained the tablets of much older and more far removed ancestors, while others might only contain the last few lineal ancestors. Not all families, and in some regions, few families belonged to clan or lineage halls and temples, the family shrine containing all the ancestors in the line as

best they could. 'Those who had their tablets burned and disposed without removal to the lineage hall would simply fade away from memory. Grave sites also often succumbed to the same treatment, becoming overgrown and forgotten' (Baker 1979, 90).

There were no hard and fast common whole-of-culture particular practices which determined how and when each ancestor was disposed of (although the ritual Classics provided hard and fast rules). Often it came down in the family to the importance of the ancestor as to just how long and where they were worshiped, especially as it concerned *wu fu*. In a simply structured small family it would be rare that more than five generations of ancestors would be worshipped. However, 'in more complex structured larger families there may be a requirement to go back further to find a uniting founding ancestor' (Baker 1979, 92). For the lineage, being an extension of the large family in structure, this was even more the case, as only in the founding ancestor could there be found all the requirements of unity for the larger group.

Ritually and symbolically the founding ancestor was extremely important and it was a frequent practice for lineages to construct ancestral/lineage halls in which to place the tablet of the founding ancestor. Here ceremonies and worship to the founding ancestor, and all that he symbolically stood for could take place. It was, however, also used for other more worldly functions such as lineage meetings and events, schooling, and as temporary accommodation. It was 'the centre of rituals and state affairs' (Chang, K. C. 1983, 37). One again this is an example of the close relationship between the dead and the living. And just as it is difficult to delineate the world of the ancestors from the world of the living, it is also difficult to delineate the world of gods, deities, spirits and Buddhas etc., from the world of ancestors.

Although Freedman (1979, 277) distinguishes ancestral halls from temples and from domestic shrines on the basis that ‘temples are devoted to gods’, this secular distinction seems only to be a matter of local custom in that lineage halls and ancestral temples as preferred places for extra-domestic ancestors were a matter of local preference. Also, as the border between the ancestors and the gods was indistinct at best, this need for distinction is superfluous for the generalized focus of this study. In South China family lineages are of primary social significance, whereas in the North the importance is not so evident, and organization of the lineage is different. ‘Chinese kinship organization varies by region... [and has] a complex history that is just beginning to be mapped out’ (Fairbank 1992, 20). This also means that the way these kinship organizations worship their ancestors is also respectively different.

In the hall or temple the founding ancestor would take pride of place, often flanked by his progeny, and sometimes even his wife. Other ancestors might also be worshipped. Depending on the circumstances and history of the lineage this could include any number of ancestors who were considered to have succeeded, or to have permanent wealth and power in the wider community, enhancing its prestige and pride in its achievements (Baker 1979, 92). To be included in the ancestral forum in such a place was a privilege, and not a right as it would be in the home. In the home could be found the most recent ancestors, whereas in the hall or temple it is most likely that the most distant would be found (Baker 1979, 93). The tablet in the hall was essentially the same as that of the home and it was worshipped in much the same way. This included the ubiquitous burning of incense, the daily provision of tea, and the occasional offerings of food and other items on special lineage or ancestral occasions.

Once an ancestor left the personal and domestic confines of the family home and was relocated to the hall, he or she lost their individuality and became just another of one of the many ancestors, which were the body corporate of ancestors representing the lineage as a whole, and which would receive the worship of the entire lineage (Baker 1979, 94; Freedman 1979, 277). The lineage was more than a religious concern – it also had important social and political implications – and so the lineage hall had important community socio-political functions. The importance of the ancestors, symbolizing the lineage in its wider meaning and connections, thus transcended any religious considerations, reflecting their indispensability in the socio-political realm. The significance of the ancestral temples and the rituals involved mirror the significance of the ancestors and indicates the social worth or value placed on ancestor worship.

3:4 Ancestor worship in recent times

The changes that occurred during the early modern period [of China] were of immense significance, but equally interesting to the historian is what did *not* change. For in the midst of the technological, institutional, and political transformations of the past 100 years and more, the traditional socio-cultural traits held on with a remarkable tenacity. (Eastman 1988, 242)

Since the 1930s, the challenge to familism has grown, but even today, after another fifty years of political revolution and economic development, the traditional sociocultural traits endure in all areas of Chinese life. In the rural areas of China

especially, where the vast majority of Chinese (still) live, the traditional ideas, attitudes, and values remain, albeit in a moderated form (Eastman 1988, 242-3).

Ancestor worship during these times of change did not die, and in the less brutal environment of today's China, it is showing a substantial recovery. Also, perhaps as an early indicator, it is noted that in Taiwan, where the political pressures against the folk religion are not as strict as they are in the PRC, there are signs that the belief in a distinctly Chinese spiritual world remains. According to Eastman (1988, 245), there are signs everywhere of this revitalization and he reports that newly constructed houses [now] contain ancestral altars.

The immense changes which China has endured over the past century emphasize not so much the change itself, but more importantly, the continuity. It appears that even revolutionary political changes may have limited impact on cultural continuities (Blair 1993, 2). The continuing importance of the family, kin, and ancestors provides insight into China's cultural continuity. 'Ancestor worship may have lost its traditional religious justifications, but assuring family immortality by having at least one child still offers a kind of significance beyond the individual to which any Chinese individual can aspire' (Blair 1993, 5).

During the near chaos of the immense social, political and economic changes since the Republican era, most of the traditional cultural family values have remained intact. There has been an enormous challenge to the position of the family in Chinese society, yet it appears that after all the 'political revolution and economic development, the traditional sociocultural traits endure in all areas of Chinese life.' In

the villages of rural China those socio-cultural qualities related to the family and kinship are still of paramount importance. 'The old attitudes thus persist in the countryside, even if some of the more brutal aspects of traditional family life appear to have moderated' (Eastman 1988, 242).

Although most religious practices since the 1950s were labelled superstitious and were seriously ridiculed, ancestor worship was (for a long time) not open to this ridicule and criticism (Baker 1979, 209). It was not until the coming of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guards that many ancestral tablets, altars and other religious relics were destroyed. Although it was attacked, ancestor worship was not consigned to the dustbin of history, and today, in a more open socio-political atmosphere following the Cultural Revolution it is showing a considerable resurgence (Eastman 1988, 242), not just in the countryside, but in China generally, as many urban 'agnostic Chinese intellectuals retain a childhood memory of sensing the realistic presence of the ancestors' spirit in front of the shadowy ancestral altar on a dark night' (Yang 1967, 17).

Even though 'the dynamics of Chinese society are still poorly understood' (Parish 1978, 1), rituals and ceremonies towards the dead ancestors remain important for many Chinese, as they 'reinforce core social relationships and values in the present lives of the Chinese people' and 'mirror the social world and the concerns of the living' (Parish 1978, 248-9). No longer do we find the ancestral tablets in the lineage hall, for there are few functioning ancestral halls, 'but many families establish ancestral tablets or surrogates for them at home for their deceased relatives' (Parish 1978, 263). Although the Red Guards had destroyed much of the paraphernalia of

ancestor worship during the ‘Smash the Four Olds’¹⁴ stage of the Cultural Revolution, most has now been replaced, although as Parish reports, now it is ‘hidden away when not in use’ and ancestor worship in the home is reported as ‘present in some form in thirty seven villages and absent in sixteen’ of the study (Parish 1978, 263). Although there have been no studies concerning the practice of ancestor worship China-wide, ‘it is probable that ancestor worship is still very much alive in China, but it is the ancestor worship of the family and not of the lineage, and it is practised for the most part out of the public eye’ (Baker 1979, 211).

Under Mao the study of sociology was deemed to be potentially dangerous, and there have been no major studies in relation to ancestor worship. However, since the end of the last century ‘Western sociologists, anthropologists, and demographers [and] China’s own social scientists were able to begin serious research of their own’ (Unger 1993, 25). While this research did not deal directly with ancestor worship it did deal with the family in general, and it is from these studies that we are able to ascertain that many of the traditional aspects of Chinese are alive and well, and many are on the increase.

It now appears that while the political changes of the last century ‘undercut the power and authority of the patriarchs and destroyed the economic logic of family farms and businesses...it [also] created demographic and material conditions conducive to large, multigenerational households with extensive economic and social ties to nearby kin’ and ‘permitted more Chinese parents and children than ever before to realize core ideals of traditional Chinese familism’ (Davis and Harrell 1993, 1-2).

¹⁴ One of the Cultural Revolution imperatives was the destruction of the Four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas

One study (Johnson 1993, 132) in south east China reports that many lineages are once again functioning and that ‘graves have been repaired, rituals are performed at the graves for apical ancestors, ancestral halls are being restored, [and] ritual feasts occur in the halls once more.’ The same study reveals that although ‘their material standard of living improve significantly. They have benefited directly or indirectly from the incorporation of the broad region into the global economy.’ It appears that any negative consequences of globalization have not impacted upon Chinese families as they have on rural folk in other situations. ‘They [the Chinese] have been able to hold the world-system at arms length to an important degree and to protect themselves from some of its most pernicious effects’ (Johnson 1993, 135).

These moves towards a strengthening of traditional family values are not only found in south east China, as a north China study has found that ‘stem and joint families have increased’ (Seldon 1993, 150-151). A south west China study, in Chengdu (Whyte 1993, 216), found ‘there is enough evidence... to state emphatically that family based cooperation and negotiation between generations remain absolutely central in reform-era China. These studies reveal that the ideal of the Chinese family remains sound, providing the ground, and perhaps being an effect (besides other causes and conditions) of the Chinese traditional practice of ancestor worship.

Another study (Chau, 2005, 236) in northern Shaanxi province in north-western China, found that from the early 1980s onward, tens of thousands of temples had been rebuilt and that popular religion enjoyed a momentous revival. This included all aspects of ancestor worship and the religious ideas and practices enabled and

associated with it. 'A government agency in Yulin prefecture estimated that by the mid-1990s there were well over 10,000 temples in the prefecture alone.'

Chau (2005, 237) also reports that despite 'state-imposed political ideals and campaign goals, villagers today are engaged in social interactions based on kinship or community obligation and responsibilities.' 'Popular religion' (although it is unclear what exactly this term refers to) or at least some of its aspects is illegal and considered superstitious by the state. However 'the police almost never crack down on popular religion; indeed, they are often invited by the temple association to attend the temple festivals and help maintain order and direct traffic (Chau 2005, 239).'

Writing a decade earlier, Ann Anagnost (1994, 222) noticed a similar disjunction between official policy and community norms. Referring to the 'overt confrontation between the Chinese socialist state and local communities over ritual practice' she noticed what she refers to as a 'politics of ritual displacement'.

During the often violent political campaigns of the Maoist period, such politics were far from unforgiving, allowing the forcible seizure and destruction of ritual places by agents, whether Red Guards or local activists, acting within an aggressive modernizing project. Although this campaign mentality has subsided, its methods persist, whether as implicit threat or explicit intervention.

It now seems that the category of 'feudal superstition' is uncertain, and 'what practices are included in it, and its strategic deployment in political discourse, all

follow the prevailing political wind.’ Given what Chau, Eastman, Yang, Parish, Baker and others have said above, the ‘political wind’ is blowing the way of the popular culture. No more does it seem that ‘the state continues to hold a militant line in discouraging popular religion, only to have its efforts mocked by the resurgent vigour of popular culture that has accompanied the economic reforms (Anagnost Anne 1994, 224).’ It seems that the deep-seated cultural norms, for the present at least, hold sway.

3:5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to describe the practice of ancestor worship, thus providing a starting point for exploring the meaning of ancestor worship in all its semantic scope. Due to recent research, a new picture of ancient China is gradually emerging, different from that which was available less than three decades ago. The importance of the unfolding story ‘lies in the cultural continuity that it discloses. Distinctive features of Chinese life today, such as autocratic government, come down directly from prehistoric times’ (Fairbank 1992, 29). It is a most important and interesting development which includes an appreciation of the continuing nature of Chinese culture, from the Neolithic villages, through to the Bronze age cities, and into Imperial and, perhaps, even contemporary modern times. What it is that has been continuous has been the subject of the chapter.

In describing ancestor worship both its ubiquity and variety have been highlighted. It is not only seen as a continuing thread throughout Chinese history, it has been practised everywhere, albeit in a range of various ways and forms. The continuity and ubiquity of ancestor worship underscores the importance of the family in the practice

of ancestor worship and therefore in Chinese culture. It becomes clearly discernable that there is a correlation between the social and political spheres which dominates the cultural landscape of China throughout its entire history.

This chapter begins to answer the question that an inquiry into the relationship between the concept of cultural continuity and the apparent dominance in Chinese history of the socio-political asks: where does the importance of the family throughout the history of China fit in this correlation? Western interrogators have habitually stopped there, with the family, and accepted its importance without asking vociferously, why? For the Chinese it did not stop with the family. Yes of course the family is important, but grounded in a philosophy of change, Chinese cultural thinking went deeper and the centre of attention has been the ancestors, and by inference a biological line stretching back into the past, and forward into the future, indefinitely.

The exposition of Chinese worship has provided both the initial meaning of ancestor worship, especially in its broader context, but importantly it has also highlighted that while local customs serve to distinguish historical and geographic place, the cultural universal has been the practice of ancestor worship. Reports and studies will find a variety of ancestors who are worshipped in a variety of ways. However, the common cultural denominator throughout time and place transcends the particularity of local custom and is found in the universality of ancestor worship. Of course just how significant is ancestor worship to an understanding of Chinese culture, is a matter still not settled. The following chapters endeavour to do just that.

Chapter 4

Mind-ing¹⁵ the Ancestors

4:1 Exploring the meaning of ancestor worship

The previous chapter provided a starting point, and a work-in-progress description and meaning for ancestor worship. In the process it made clear ancestor worship's position as a Chinese cultural universal. It engaged with the question, 'what were the Chinese doing when they practised ancestor worship throughout their long history?' The aim of this chapter is to show that the intrinsic reverence for ancestors provides the starting place for the worldview and subsequent ethical, social and political life of the Chinese people – it shows what ancestor worship means to the practioners and to Chinese culture. It deals with the importance of the ancestors in the minds of the Chinese and in the Chinese mind. It shows how ancestor worship was instrumental in the inception and continuation of Chinese culture, and it asks the question, 'what were the Chinese thinking when they practised ancestor worship?' The focus remains on the clearly observable empirical object (the rituals of ancestor), however it is also necessary to make 'implicit claims about what [the cultural] symbol means' (Swidler 2001, 75). In making these rational claims about an empirical object it is recognized that:

no simple either/or contrast can be made between theory and practice; [that] no indefeasible distinction can be established between visible external practices and invisible external states; [that] any attempt to give a satisfactory description of social

¹⁵ The hyphenated spelling here indicates a combination of meanings, from the contemporary general meaning to *care*, and the more original meaning to keep it (the ancestor) in *mind* in order to care. It also has implications in the relationship between *mind* and philosophy, and *mind* and spirit and its religious connotations.

life must make reference to much else besides practice; and [that] practice does not account for its own production and reproduction. (Barnes 2001, 19)

This chapter therefore seeks meaning in the practice and it will try to find an answer to the question raised by Kenneth Latourette (1964, 540) when he stated that: ‘As a factor in moulding Chinese life, [ancestor worship] can hardly be exaggerated.’ It will also examine the assertion made by Donald Holzman (1998, 186) that the worship of ancestors played an absolutely vital and central function in the lives of the Chinese. Holzman was referring to the ancient Chinese. However, as Thomas Metzger points out, and as I have previously mentioned, cultural continuity is a hallmark of Chinese culture, there being a ‘great continuity between modern and premodern Chinese thought’, (Metzger 1990, 268) and therefore ‘distinctive features of Chinese life today ... come down directly from prehistoric times’ (Fairbank 1992, 29).

The hermeneutic method employed here inquires about culture by exploring its ‘pattern of meanings’ (Geertz 1973) and the ‘world of thought’ (Schwartz 1985) of the Chinese to discover their ‘shared cultural assumptions’ (Nathan 1993). The overall argument remains, in that it still gives priority to what people do: it is still practice theory, although it may also properly be called hermeneutic because it consistently and constantly oscillates its focus from the symbol and practice of ancestor worship, (as the sum of the original solutions), to particular instances of Chinese culture and history. As we are seeking a better way to understand Chinese culture, within these shared cultural assumptions, we are seeking and trying to isolate ‘certain dominant orientations which came to prevail’ in the long continuity of Chinese culture, finding it of course, in the ‘pervasiveness’ (Schwartz 1985, 9) of what we call ancestor

worship. I believe, along with Derk Bodde (1967, 19), 'that it is possible to detect certain concepts or patterns which, because of their frequent appearance in widely separated times and contexts, may fairly be regarded as basic in Chinese philosophical thinking'.

David Keightly (1990, 44, 45) refers to a cultural pattern when he writes:

To the extent that it is possible to speak of one strategic custom or institution in the mix of early China's cultural variables - strategic because of its pervasive ability to sanctify all other aspects of life and to legitimate and reinforce the lineage - it would seem to be ancestor worship and its social and political corollaries involving hierarchy, ritual deference, obedience, and reciprocity.

In order to examine and explore the pattern of meaning or world of thought of Chinese culture we will here open to view ancestor worship and its social and political corollaries. Here the initial focus is on thinking rather than doing (the overall focus). It is a kind of analysis with an incorporated interest in metaphysical (philosophical and religious) questions. Here, the terms philosophy and religion are used in two modes. First, current philosophical and religious terms and ideas are used to elucidate and discuss important characteristics of Chinese culture, characteristics which lend support to the overall thesis concerning the importance of ancestor worship in Chinese culture, or characteristics which show the connections between ancestor worship and Chinese culture. Second, the history of Chinese thought, considered as Chinese philosophy or Chinese religion, is explored and discussed. Although it should be noted that the categories philosophy and religion are merely cognitive tools and cannot be separated from other categories which enquire into, or go to make up an

enquiry into culture. Ideas, whether seen as individual or communal, may be expressed in many ways; and [only] one of these is through its articulation in philosophy (Solomon 1993, 4).

However, before I explicate the meaning of ancestor worship and its corollaries, I want to present the following excerpts from a Tang poem written by Ou-yang Xiu (1007-1072). The author is described by Shi Shun Liu (1979, 137) as ‘the greatest prose writer of the Sung dynasty’ and as ‘a literary genius who wrote in a free and natural style’. Titled ‘Inscription on the Memorial Tablet for the Passage to the Shuangkang Tomb’ it economically provides an insight into a [or even ‘the’] Chinese mind as it experiences filial and ancestral piety. I will not provide a commentary on the poem as I consider it will only detract from the inherent insights found within the text. I believe that the poem reflects much of what I want to say throughout this thesis.

Alas, sixty years after the burial of my revered father, the Duke of Ch’ung, at Shuangkang, I am at last able to erect this tablet for the passage of his tomb! The reason for the long delay is not that I have ventured to procrastinate, but that I have been obliged to wait.

Unfortunately I was bereaved of my father at the age of four. My mother vowed to live out her life as a widow, though she had to maintain a poor family by working to earn food and clothing. She reared and taught me until I grew up, when she told me:

“Your father was an incorruptible official, but he was fond of giving to others and extending hospitality to his guests. Though his emoluments were few, he always saw to it that nothing was left. ‘Let not this be a source of embarrassment to me!’ he

would say. And so he died without leaving even a house with a single tile on its roof, or a single piece of cultivated land on which the family could have depended for its living. What was it, then, that I counted on to sustain me? I knew one or two things about your father, which gave me reason to wait for you to grow up.

“When I married into your family, I was not in time to serve my mother-in-law. But I knew that your father was a filial son. You lost your father when you were young, and I could not be sure that you would one day stand on your own feet. But I knew that your father was destined to have worthy offspring. When I first joined with your father, he had hardly passed the mourning period for his mother a little over a year earlier. Whenever memorial services were held, he would say with tears:

‘Sacrificial offerings, however abundant, cannot compare with even scant food for parents when they are still alive.’

...

When I witnessed his expression of grief once or twice, I thought that it was only because he had recently passed the mourning period. Later I observed that his grief was always the same and it was no different for the rest of his life.

....

[The mother continues for a few more paragraphs extolling the virtues of the father]

It was twenty years after the decease of my father that I began to receive official emoluments for the support of my family.

...

Eight years later, despite my humble talents, I was appointee Vice Premier and given the opportunity to participate in important affairs.

...

Since the time when I was invested with the Vice Premiership, Their Majesties have extended favors to my family by posthumously honoring three generations of my immediate forebears.

...

I cannot help being moved to tears when I say this:

“Good deeds are never unrewarded, though it may be early or late. That is a truism. My grandfather accumulated many good deeds and had great virtue. He deserved indeed a rich reward. Although he did not receive it in his lifetime, yet posthumously titles and honors have been bestowed on him and have been sanctified by the solemn mandates of three imperial reigns. This is an illustrious example for future generations and a blessing for his own children.”

Wherefore I have set down the tabular history of the family and caused it to be engraved on the tablet. I have also recorded in it my father’s testaments and the manner in which my mother taught me and waited for me to grow up. I have done this to make known that there is ample reason why I have been so fortunate as to be able to keep my integrity intact and brought no disgrace upon my ancestors, though, with my modest virtue and limited ability, I have merely been favored by the times and never deserved the positions I have held. (translated by Liu 1979, 200)

4:2 Ancestor worship and Chinese philosophy

Chinese philosophy opposes conventional Western philosophy, which persistently explores truth with the help of a single, individual mind, aiming at the crystallization of a truth relevant for everybody. What matters here is that the truth of Chinese philosophy and culture, (philosophy is considered the elucidation of much of what I

have called ‘shared cultural assumptions’), is made open to view or exposed by foregrounding the Chinese way of life that is found within the culture. Wittgenstein’s term *Lebensform* or ‘form of life’ is appropriate here as it stresses the intertwining of culture, worldview and language (Glock 1996, 124). This study is radical in the sense that it aims to make clear for the Western audience the established and unique Chinese way of thinking that the thesis suggests may be found in the cultural practice of ancestor worship. I want to emphasize in this chapter, among other things, that Chinese culture is distinctive (Nathan 1993, 923) and that ancestor worship is vital to (an understanding of) Chinese culture. In the process I will at times compare the Chinese way of thinking with the Western way of thinking, for as John Blair (1993, 29) reminds us:

It is precisely the function of comparative culture studies to make basic postulates explicit in the process of comparing one way of life with another, in particular by using the cultural other to bring into conscious definition unspoken presuppositions that inform familiar habits of mind.

4:2:1. The beginning of Chinese philosophy

Chinese philosophy finds its beginnings in the everyday life of the ancient Chinese and is part of the cultural background of the Chinese people. In this way it is like any philosophy which is a ‘conscious effort to formulate, [and articulate], views and values as expressions of the fundamental beliefs of a people’ (Cheng 2001, 494). Philosophy is one way to uncover those essential elements which underpin the culture. Here we seek, the ‘essential ways of thinking’, usually conceptualized by

philosophy as cosmology, ontology, and ethics, but what we might also understand as ‘worldviews, configurations of culture, themes, ethos, and *eidos*’ (Wright 1967, vii). The articulation (and the philosophical texts) comes only after an idea has already gained access to the wider cultural understanding. Philosophy articulates something more basic than itself – it articulates cultural ideas. These ideas may be articulated by a single philosopher or the philosophical school which may be attributed to them, such as Confucius and Confucianism. When ideas are expressed in common behaviour and ritual they define that culture. However when it is articulated, ‘it is usually identified, and becomes a philosophy.’ Western ideology, as a bourgeois ideology, places a very high premium on this articulation, on philosophy (Solomon 1993, 5).

However, this thesis has little concern (being trans-disciplinary) for any distinct focus on what category or by what discipline the subject, or by which ideological values Chinese culture, is understood. Although philosophy as such is the current tool in use, what is more important here is a self-critical approach towards these conceptual tools that emerge from one’s culture. An awareness of the use of conceptual categories employed here and a negation of their habitual usage as categories of ‘precision and exactness’ will guard against their employment becoming ‘spuriously lucid’ (Cohen and Goldman 1990, 3).

In considering both the temporal and cognitive beginnings of both the Chinese culture and its ‘other’, Western culture, it is certain that these beginnings of individual and collective thought, as basic orientations and ultimate values in life, were, and are,

influenced by their respective environments (Cheng 2001, 500). David Keightly (1990, 22) points out, in regard to the impact of the environment on Chinese culture,:

Neolithic cultures in China flourished during the Postglacial Climatic Optimum, when it is probable that temperatures were some two to four degrees Celsius lower than they are today and rainfall, in at least the middle Yangtze and north China, was more abundant. The development of early Chinese culture must be understood in the context of these relatively beneficial natural conditions.

These ‘beneficial conditions’ led to ‘a self-sustaining agricultural system [which] made its debut around 5000 B.C.’ and help explain why China is ‘the only major civilization of ancient origin that is still distinctive and vital today’ (Ho 1976, 547). More than just longevity, though, the geographical and climatic conditions of early China led to a different worldview and to the formation of a different culture.

4:2:2 Different beginnings and worldviews

Archaeological evidence indicates that thousands (7000 confirmed sites according to Overmeyer 1995, 124) of villages in China flourished in the Neolithic period. This suggests a ‘greater population density than in Mesopotamia and Greece’, and a Chinese ‘experience’ and worldview which would be ‘less individualistic, more group-oriented’ (Keightly 1990, 48)’ – an organic humanism.

Joseph Needham (1956, 283-284) has demonstrated a phenomenon of signal importance which differentiates Chinese from Western patterns of thinking. We in the West, he points out, have been dominated by a worldview in which the cosmos, far

from being a self-contained, self operating organism, is conceived of as having been initially created and since then externally controlled by a Divine Power who 'legislates' the phenomena of the non-human natural world. This conception, from which has arisen the 'Laws of Nature', is, of course, not of European origin, being traceable all the way back to ancient Mesopotamia. Of China though, Needham sees a different worldview:

Not in human society only but throughout the world of Nature, there was a give and take, a kind of mutual courtesy rather than strife among inanimate powers and processes, a finding of solutions by compromise, of avoidance of mechanical force, and an acceptance of the inevitability of the birth and doom of every natural thing.

Jacques Gernet (1982, 29) summarizes the variation in worldviews and philosophy by providing a list of ways in which China is culturally different (he sees it in philosophical terms) from the West. He writes that in general:

China does not know the transcendent truths, the idea of good in itself, the notion of property in the strict sense of the term. She does not like the exclusion of opposition, the idea of the absolute, the positive exclusion between mind and matter; she prefers the notions of complementary, circulation, influx, of action at a distance, of a model, and the idea of order as an organic totality.

This account of cultural distinctions between China and the West is addressed below, and indeed throughout the thesis. Here I will provide a general overview of these differences, showing their relationship to ancestor worship by discussing them in the

categories of: change, negative vs. positive, death, harmony, and vagueness vs. clarity.

In China, where worldview was heavily influenced by the biological and social, and manifested in ancestor worship, the question of origins was more often one of history and genealogy. The Chinese worldview was less likely to contain problems of origin in the way that the Greeks concerned were with questions of origins, first causes and first principles (Keightly 1990, 35). The distinctive Greek (and Western) inclination to question and complain about the human condition - whether that questioning was religious, metaphysical, or political - may be related to the marked difference that distinguished humans from some first cause entity, be it God, gods, or in later times, the laws of nature. This conceptual otherness, leading to ontological and epistemological dualism, which was not found to any degree in Chinese philosophy, led to a more critical view of the world by the Greeks and by Western philosophy generally. For the Chinese however, their world was more organic and unified. The ancestors, the centre of origin, were like themselves, and not conceptually seen as the 'other'. Therefore the past was not a period of unknown and frightening quality, but was, through ancestral connection, the incorporated source of cultural (biological, religious, social and political) identity.

Both pre-modern and modern Western science presupposes that existence is governed and can be known by a natural order which is the foundation for truth. Therefore any explanations or explications concerning the world are both possible and desirable in this rationalized format. Even the Western religious worldview, (now) assumes this quasi scientific-rational view of the world, albeit in a spiritual context. The West, as

Derk Bodde (1952, 20) rightly makes clear, has been subject to a worldview ‘which is conceived of as having been initially created, and since then externally controlled, by a Divine Power who “legislates” the phenomena of the nonhuman natural world.’

Here in this religious discourse, the orderliness of existence is accountable to ‘divine creation and the Laws of God’ in opposition to an independent, rule governed natural world. However, both views, the religious and the scientific, have for hundreds of years presupposed ‘a stable and ultimately predictable fundament. Whatever changes does so in function of certain immutable *laws* of God or nature which we like to think we are on our way to understanding’ (Blair 1993, 7).

In philosophic terms, Western thinking separated reality from appearance, and objectivity from subjectivity. From Mesopotamian thought, through to the ancient Greeks and onto modern thought with Descartes, Western thinking searched for and gave precedence to the real and the objective. Chinese thought did not lack metaphysical concern. However, it did not separate the practical from the metaphysical concerns as in both ancient and modern Western dualistic thought. This belief in an inconclusive ground of what appeared to be conclusive highlights the decision to give *change* a fundamental place in Chinese ontology, rather than an absolute and unwavering being of early Greek ontology as reflected in its notions of substance (Cheng 1989, 1991, 2001).

4:2:3 The concept of change and other philosophic differences

It is in its basic ontology that Chinese philosophy (particularly its worldview) fundamentally diverges in a basic cultural difference from Western thinking and

Western philosophy. ‘The ancient Chinese from the very beginning recognized and accepted change and transformation as irreducible attributes of the world, including both things and human selves’ (Cheng 2001, 502). The Chinese worldview gives the characteristic of change extraordinary importance (Blair 1993). Reality itself is understood as constantly and elusively changing. The huge importance given to change may be seen, at least in text form, in and about the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)*, one of the oldest surviving Chinese classics. Here in this text ‘the entire universe is characterized by a process of change’ (Watson 1962, 152).

In the Western view, and here is the nub of the argument (about change as a cultural distinction), change is not fundamental and therefore it lacks importance. Whatever changes does so due to God’s or nature’s laws, whereas for the Chinese the experience of changes in nature ‘becomes consciously organized and articulated into a system of thinking about and organizing reality’ (Cheng 2001, 502). This system of thinking about reality, a worldview no less, we can rightly call *Zhou Yi* (another title for the *Yi Jing*, *The Book of Changes*), the understanding of the world in relation to change according to the Zhou, as Cheng indicates:

In the deep experience of ancestral unity, one can detect elements of totality, mutual placement, mutual support, interdependence, and a natural process of transformation and return. The key point for this experience is the experience of time in the act of reverence for the ancestral spirits as related to us. (Cheng 2001, 497)

What at first appears to be incongruous is that Chinese philosophy is comparatively concrete, worldly, and practical, and at the same time is underpinned by change. It assigns only modest value to the powers of theorizing, analysis, and argumentation,

yet places a high value on practical human wisdom, a wisdom that apparently greatly exceeds human discursive resources for grounding and explaining its successes.

While Western philosophy does display some similar characteristics, notably in works by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, who also apply non-argument modes of persuasion, it is important to note 'that such features distinguish Chinese philosophy through their comparative centrality to the tradition as a whole' (Wong 2003, 55).

The way that the concept of change is apprehended and used has a number of consequences, not necessarily related causally, but nevertheless related. One of these ways of understanding this view of reality is whether or not it is considered in a negative or a positive manner. 'Optimistic faith in the comprehensibility and benevolence of the universe' is connected to the "epistemological optimism" of early Chinese philosophy' (Keightley 1990, 21). For the Chinese any circumstances of decline or disintegration are understood as temporary in a continual overall situation of change which is eternally moving to and then away from the most orderly of conditions. 'Negative [pessimistic] judgments about any state of being are not permitted because they are seen as the total process of reality' (Blair 1993 4).

David Keightley (1990, 21) defines this optimism as the willingness to accept large, roughly defined moral ideas - like 'benevolence' or 'righteousness' - as 'reliable, universal, and objective', adding that the Chinese system of government has for over two millennia been a product of this optimism, for, 'if leaders are good - and if good is unambiguous - who needs to be protected against them?' And with further optimism, the works of Confucius and Xunzi especially, are resplendent with verses

which argue that all people were able to be educated to be good. The example below is from the *Xunzi, On Nature* (Ch17):

Nature (*Tien*, Heaven) operates with constant regularity. It does not exist for the sake of (sage-emperor) Yao nor does it exist because of (wicked king) Chieh^[16]. Respond to it with peace and order, and good fortune will result....When [natural disasters or bad omens occur], all people in the state are afraid and ask, “why?” I reply: There is no need to ask why. These are changes of heaven and earth, the transformation of yin and yang, and rare occurrences. It is right to marvel at them, but wrong to fear them. For there has been no age that has not had the experience of eclipses of the sun and moon, unreasonable rain or wind....If the ruler is enlightened and the government peaceful, even if all these things happen at the same time, they would do no harm (Chan 1963, 120).

The twentieth century Chinese philosopher and thinker Qian Mu, when referring to a culturally distinctive pattern in Chinese history, provides an interesting analogy of the difference between the West and China, and how they view their world:

The pattern [of Chinese history] is China’s, and it differs from the West’s as a poem differs from a drama. The one develops in a metre from rhyme to rhyme, always by the same rules; the other develops in stages, from act to act, always with a different plot. The one expands to fill a space when it is ordered and disintegrates when it is not. The other progresses from conflict to conflict toward some inevitable conclusion. (Dennerline 1988, 66)

¹⁶ Chieh is Jie in pinyin

Another means of discussing cultural differences between the West and China, still under the rubric of the positive/negative dichotomy, is how they approach the problem of death. The Chinese see death as unproblematic. It 'was simply not the issue it was for the ancient Mesopotamians or the ancient Greeks' (Keightly 1990, 34). China did not concern itself with the great mythic themes of death that so interested the Greeks. Their interest was almost entirely about social order and morality. Chinese society, underpinned by a concern for ancestors, did not see the great distance between mortality and heaven (and God) that was evident in early Western thought, and which is still so evident today.

The culmination of the development of thought which emanates from an ancestral world is the sense of connection and correlation between individuals and their family, between individuals and the state, and even between individuals and nature or the cosmos. There is a positive and deeply rooted feeling of ancestral unity and harmony, understood as order and symbolic meaning. We know that ancestor worship has been practised by the Chinese since the earliest recorded times and that since then the ancestors of the Chinese people have needed a considerable amount of attention from their descendents. All Chinese, regardless of different faiths or philosophies, shared a common (cultural) confidence in the unity of all things (Ropp 1990, xv). It therefore can be assumed that

The Chinese people as a whole experienced a sense of centrality and totality and thus seemed to strive for more integration and cohesion in history than other people. This no doubt contributed to the philosophical awareness [worldview] of harmony as an underlying strain of both cosmos and society in the sphere of Chinese culture. (Cheng 2001, 500)

One of the most well-known and celebrated accounts of this idea and aim of harmony, is the following passage on *The Age of Grand Unity* from the *Li Chi* (De Bary 1960, 175-6):

Once, Confucius was taking part in the winter sacrifice. After the ceremony was over, he went for a stroll along the top of the city gate and sighed mournfully. He sighed for the state of Lu. His disciple...asked: 'Why should the gentleman sigh?' Confucius replied: 'The practice of the Great way, the illustrious men of the Three Dynasties – these I shall never know in person. And yet they inspire my ambition! When the Great Way was practice, the world was shared by all alike. The worthy and the able were promoted to office and men practised good faith and lived in affection. Therefore they did not regard as parents only their own parents, or as sons only their own sons. The aged found a fitting close to their lives, the robust their proper employment; the young were provided with an upbringing and the widow and widower, the orphaned and the sick, with proper care. Men had their tasks and women their hearths. They hated to see goods lying about in waste, yet they did not hoard then for themselves; they disliked the thought that their energies were not fully used, yet they used them not for private ends. Therefore all evil plotting was prevented and thieves and rebels did not arise, so that people could leave their outer gates unbolted. This was the age of Grand Unity.

The bifurcation of dualities in the Chinese worldview is not as clear or distinct as the Western worldview. It has about it a particular vagueness. Nor does it function as it does in the Western worldview. Western culture is predisposed to 'differentiate binary concepts as opposing and contending forces' for example, god/devil; true/false; right/wrong 'or indeed the limitless other dichotomies that give shape to Western

thought and orientation to western cultures' (Blair 1993, 8). The Chinese view may be seen as a cultural disinterest in particularity, and may be found in, and is related to, ancestor worship. An empirical example was highlighted in the previous chapter where the vague and somewhat casual way that many Chinese viewed the numinous world of ancestors, gods and spirits was noted. Considered from a religio-philosophical viewpoint, 'the line dividing the divine from the human is not sharply drawn, and it seems that humans may possess or take on qualities which are truly numinous' (Schwartz 1985, 25), or, as argued previously, the numinous realm came to be seen nearer to the phenomenal human world.

Chinese philosophical vagueness may also be related to ancestor worship (Keightly 1990, 42). Ancestor worship involves belief about the dead ancestors who are conceived in a certain way. There exists a correlation between an emphasis on social hierarchy and the vagueness with which the afterlife is imagined. When the social structure, with its emphasis on hierarchy, is seen to be successful, there is little need imagine and describe in detail the 'other' world.

The Mesopotamian and Greek concern in both religion and art with personality, social role, and the chaos of constructed, adversarial existence was replaced in China, if it had ever been present, by a generalized concern with harmonious order and design and with ingrained and symbolic meanings. (Keightly 1990, 43)

This vagueness or absence of boundary concerning the Chinese worldview, as understood both religiously and philosophically, helps explain the close connections between the world of the ancestors and the social world, and points to the crucial role of the ancestors, and therefore of kinship, in the entire development of Chinese

civilization. Ancestor worship, focusing on ancestors, remembering ancestors, *mind-ing* the ancestors, not only means another way of conceptualizing change, it also serves as a link between past, present and future, and the secular and sacred, what we in the West may term the philosophic and rational with the religious.

Chinese culture emphasizes continuance. Understanding Chinese culture in this way helps to explain many of its obvious characteristics. The ever-present importance of the family is an example of the emphasis on cultural (and biological) continuity. Survival of the family line, from ancestors to heirs, is a basic expectation. Ancestor worship for the Chinese provides significance over and beyond any individual aspirations. The ancestors were the central element in the Chinese worldview and connected with all other significant things (*significants*) in the Chinese world.

4:3 Ancestor worship and religion

I mention above that the division or distinction of dualities in the Chinese worldview is not as apparent as it is in the Western worldview. Curiously, how we in the West view religion in China is also somewhat indistinct. Marcel Granet (1975, 147) notices that ‘at first sight, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is less appreciable in China than among us’ and so we give to them, ‘according to observers,’ the status of being both at the same time, ‘the most practical or the most superstitious people in the world.’

But that does not mean that they are religious: we do not always mean that religion equals superstition. Throughout their history and across any social divides, the Chinese have been ‘deeply concerned about mystical forces and the supernatural.’

Spirits and gods were thought to be everywhere – usually unseen, but nonetheless real...And in any town or village, regardless of the day of the year, a visitor could see incense and spirit-money burned, food sacrificed, and fire crackers exploded. The sense that supernatural beings were omnipresent was expressed by the small boy who, before relieving himself alongside a dark street, warned the spirit lurking in the spot: ‘I am going to urinate. Please stand aside’. (Eastman 1988, 41)

Yet ‘numerous observers’ have seen the Chinese as ‘highly rationalistic people, spared the religious prejudices and superstitions that have tarnished the history of the Western world’ (Eastman 1988, 41). One of those numerous observers was Joseph Needham (1971, 90) who clearly stated that the ‘Chinese mood was essentially secular.’ David Keightley (1978, 212) refers to the ‘secular values [of] the great tradition of the Chou [Zhou] and Han dynasties’ and of the ‘religious logic’ of Shang thought. Yet he also warns us that this way of understanding the (Shang) Chinese should obscure ‘the fact that all aspects of Shang life could be impregnated...with religious significance.’ This ‘paradoxical religious logic,’ which is ‘permeated with a commitment to ancestors’ and is ‘strongly religious in the totality of its demands’ may also be characterized as ‘nonreligious, non-mysterious, and rational in its logic.’ Keightley is able to talk about these seemingly illogical and paradoxical equations as he rationally and reasonably explains that as a religion ‘Shang ancestor worship and Shang political culture stressed the lineage as a source of authority’ – the religion was a source of social rationale (Keightley 1978, 214).

This apparent inconsistency of thought or ‘paradoxical religious logic’ as it relates to the practices of the Chinese, and whether they are religious or not, superstitious and practical or not, may be explained away by our grammatical confusion and how we understand and use the words. And of course our *Lebensform*, our cultural and ideological form of life, our own cultural bias leads us to particular understandings and uses.

There are more practical matters which provide nuances of meaning. The Chinese gods, it must be noted, ‘were something less than omnipotent. Gods they were, but they differed from human beings by degree rather than kind. Many gods in fact were thought to be simply the spiritual emanations of former prominent mortals’ (Eastman 1988, 44). A critical view of this ancestor centered thesis, perhaps a view influenced by a religious paradigm of understanding, would undoubtedly point out the importance of gods in the Chinese worldview, and would also point to the absolute authority of *shangdi* and *tian* in early China, and therefore note their influence in Chinese culture. However, I would argue, that this apparently important cultural (religious, social, and political) viewpoint is questionable on two grounds. First, as Cheng Chung-ying (2001, 499) posits, ‘there is an intrinsic organic interrelation between the rise of beliefs in *shangdi* and *tian*, the institutionalization of *li* [ritual] as a system of social ordering and the formation of a unified social-political economy based on agriculture.’ Benjamin Schwartz (1985, 29) in referring to a number of key anthropological texts notes that they all have in common a hypothesis that the appearance of a supreme deity ‘coincides with the supremacy of Shang and its ruling clan.’

It is also important to consider the approach that many of the literati took in relation to religion. While most ‘never resolutely taught the vanity of belief in gods or in the survival of the souls, the majority professed a prudent agnosticism’ (Granet 1975, 149). What the literati wanted to avoid was a head on clash with ancestor worship, ‘probably for fear of undermining the realistic beliefs which seemed necessary for the popular cult of the Ancestors.’ The popular position was one of ‘prudent agnosticism.’ Therefore, the ‘popular cult of the Ancestors’ was never really challenged and it may be considered ‘as a firm and lasting popular faith’ (Granet 1975, 149). Even though the early literati were often employed as ‘presiding priests, particularly for funeral ceremonies,’ and ‘advocated funeral rites of remarkable length and complexity’ (Eno 1990, 61), and the *Analects* (e.g., A: 2.5, 3.12), ‘placed great value on rite of sacrifice, Confucius appears sceptical about the ability of prayer to influence events’ (A:7.35).

Another aspect of Shang religion is that ‘the God-on-high (*shangdi*) does not seem to have been thought of as a creator, but as part of the total existing universe’ (Milston 1978, 57). There is a striking difference between Western and Chinese cosmological views. In other words, *shangdi* most probably emerged as a consequence or even as a political strategy from the historical social conditions of the time, and its supreme importance was only a conditional outcome of specific political needs. It did not have the underlying cultural significance required to be considered an ongoing and continual cultural imperative.

Second, as previously noted, there was no sense of radical difference between spirits and humans. The Shang and Zhou may have seen these deities, and also other spirits,

such as that of rivers and mountains, and fertility gods, as originally local gods, and tribal ancestors (Schwartz 1985, 20). There is some evidence that *shangdi*, the God or Lord on High, was the first ancestor of the Shang lineage (Keightley 1978, 213), and that the 'great bulk of Shang sacrificial wealth and divinatory attention was devoted to the ancestors.' Indeed 'the two religious orientations, ancestor worship and all the other gods and spirits may not have been mutually exclusive' (Schwartz 1985, 20). Although there were other deities spirits worshipped, their separate realm, if it existed, was unclear. In any case they were somehow always connected biologically via the ancestors. The paradigm of understanding other gods, nature spirits, and deities, and the realm in which they existed, was the same paradigm which understood the ancestors and their realm.

Chinese civilization, as the 'world's longest continuous civilization,' and one that 'is generally conceded to be a unique phenomenon in world history' (Ropp 1990, x), has a correspondingly wide range of explanations provided for this uniqueness. The one overriding concern by the Chinese, which may account for this uniqueness, is a focus on the biological and social, and its continuation. This concern is regarded 'as a focal value in Chinese culture', which has its 'beginnings ... in prehistoric times' (Ho 1976, 547). Although the religiosity, as such, of ancestor worship is unclear and not a matter able to be settled, one thing is clear; and that is [ancestor worship's] 'universal vitality and its unrivalled importance in the national life. The ancestral tablets possess as great a significance as ever' (Addison 1924, 492).

4:4 The social and political significance

The significance of the ancestors is a social significance. Although they do have a central position in the religious realm, and they have an important originaive position in Chinese philosophy, the real power of the ancestors, in regard to their exemplary position in Chinese culture, lies in the social realm, and consequently, as will be seen, in the correlative political realm. It is not by accident that the majority of philosophical texts throughout Chinese history concerned the political and the social. Even the more metaphysical Taoist texts address these issues, albeit often in a negative way. The ancestors are not just residents of a spiritual (religious) world. 'As members of a familial community across the barrier of life and death, they...play a familial role in that community and their kinship status retains its importance,' an 'importance which is found in its connections with the living' (Schwartz 1985, 21). Ancestors are not only the progenitors of the present generation, but also represent the ideal paradigm model for the social order. It is from the ancestors that the present generation finds a sense of value, and an understanding of what is right and wrong, good and evil. The ancestors provide both the values and the structural model for social unity.

The social and political importance of ancestors is apparent when it is realized that a particular civilizational accomplishment by China is its socio-political organization which has proved so successfully long-lasting and so effective in maintaining a unified society over such a vast special area and over such a long period of time. When compared to a similar space and time frame, such as that of Europe, it is quite an accomplished performance. 'The development of the political sphere in the Chinese world and its pre-eminence over all other (military, religious, economic) is one of its most characteristic marks' (Gernet 1982, 27). The key to political success

and the control of society was not to be found in technological or military dominance, but through the social control of family line; lineage and the ancestors. When formalized, ancestor worship leads to a bureaucracy. Ancestor worship explains the genesis of bureaucracy and its importance throughout Chinese history.

The form that political authority, and the civil theology supporting it, eventually took as the political culture became increasingly secularized in Chou times continued to manifest a commitment to hierarchical, authoritarian, quasi-magical, bureaucratic features whose presence may be discovered in the characteristic generationism and contractual logic of Shang ancestor worship. Other civilizations have certainly developed centralized administrations that were more or less bureaucratic; it is only in China however, that the bureaucratic role, with all its kin and ritual elements, has been so passionately cherished. (Keightley 1978, 223)

The Chinese cosmos also became bureaucratized. The social world produced the religious and metaphysical world (such as they were), and the religious and philosophical world helped explain and sustain the social and political realms. Although as Schwartz (1985, 29) argues, ‘the ancestral cult as an ultimate source of political legitimation has its limitations. Yet in the end everyone has ancestors. Ancestor worship is, in a sense, an egalitarian religion, since all people have kin.’

With ancestor worship, and its social and political correlations, ‘the common source of the family becomes the revered centering origin of all the life in the family’ (Cheng 2001, 498), and when the common source is extended to a higher level social level, ‘it becomes the common and revered source for the community. With the concept of

minzu, the people's descent group [or larger community], comes the idea of family extending to the state or nation' (Dennerline 1988, 165).

Although ancestor worship played an important role in the establishment, structure and maintenance of the polity in China, and ancestral-worship ritual provided the ideological basis and legitimacy for the rule of Shang royal lineages, the assumption that rulers throughout Chinese history have deliberately cultivated ancestor worship as the foundation of royal legitimacy is incorrect. Benjamin Schwartz (1990, 21) argues that ancestor worship's pervasiveness is not directly related to political ordering.

Ancestor worship may have indeed contributed to an extraordinarily powerful conception of political ordering China. This does not prove that it had not previously been a pervasive orientation of neolithic culture. Its continuing strong hold on the religion of the people in China hardly seems to be an imposition from above.

Furthermore, Francis Hsu (1971, 307) importantly notes that although 'Chinese dynasties lasted much longer along hereditary lines' than pre-modern European states, this was despite the 'prevalence of the notion of Mandate of Heaven which provided for the replacement of an incompetent dynasty by a new and more efficient one.' The Mandate of Heaven seems to undermine the argument that ancestor worship was cultivated to continue royal legitimacy, for other families also had ancestors.

4:5 A confluence of *significants*

Ancestor worship was not only a religious phenomenon, it was also important to Chinese culture generally, for it was through the cult of the ancestors that emphasis came to bear on those familial and kinship aspects that tended toward social harmony and stability. The unity and good order of the family and the state were achieved through a focus on ancestral worship, or ancestral piety. This became better known as filial piety or *xiao*. This ancestral/filial worship/piety, ‘together with those other religious features which were intertwined with them, powerful urges to conformity in family and state, are probably what was meant by those people who have spoken of *Confucianism*’ (Baker 1979, 105).

The so-called Confucian texts and other classical texts provide powerful metaphorical images surrounding the efficacy of ancestor worship and its corollaries. However access to what the sages and writers knew could only be achieved through the practice of ancestor worship itself. ‘No matter how sacred the text may be’, Qian Mu tells Dennerline (1988, 15), ‘its meaning depends on the context and on the receptivity of the reader’s mind. When you study, you must also understand the meaning of what is not said. For every word written, there may be three that are not written.’ The relevance of this quote goes back to the theories underpinning this thesis, and especially its prime focus on practice theory, its postmodern suspicion of the meta-narrative, and the inherent hermeneutical weakness of the Confucian narrative generally. I mention this here, not as a criticism of Confucianism, (although I have questioned Confucianism’s role as the cultural master narrative), or the classical texts, but merely as an introduction to another important factor in assessing the significance of ancestor worship, and that is the rituals of the practice themselves, again a subject that will be discussed at length in chapter five. However what I do want to make clear,

is that although this chapter deals with the significance of ancestor worship in the minds of the Chinese, this does not, or should not, lead to an assumption, that the significance can somehow be found in philosophical texts, and as such in the minds of the elite.

Maurice Freedman (1979, 37) in *On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion* (and here I seek the sociological rather than the religious insights), posited that both the elite religion and peasant religion in China ‘rest on a common base representing two versions of one religion that we see as idiomatic translations of each other.’ Whether or not Chinese culture is viewed as homogenous or as two separate entities, elite and peasant, a common and enduring characteristic is the practice of ritual. And although the focus in this chapter is more mental or cognitive, and certainly philosophical and religious, the rites and rituals of the Chinese, especially as they concern the worship of the ancestors, played an important role in those ‘mental’ and even philosophical aspects of Chinese culture.

The rituals and rites of Chinese culture, the *li*, began with ancestral worship during the dim Neolithic times. ‘In fact part of the word *li* refers to the offering of patterned jade for sacrificial ritual’ (Cheng 2001, 497). According to Xunzi, who saw the social and symbolic function of rituals, ‘*li* is important to all aspects of human society...it distinguishes civilised patterns of behaviour, and maintains the political order’ (Chow 1994, 56). Chapter five discusses at length all the ramifications of ritual or *li*; however for now it is important to introduce it as a significant part of the considerations of the importance of ancestor worship in Chinese culture.

In the *Lilun* (Discussion of Rites) Xunzi says of *li*, that:

heaven and earth are joined in harmony; ...through *li* men's likes and dislikes are regulated...[and] through the *li*, the root and the branches are put in proper order; beginning and end are made consonant; the most elegant forms embody all distinctions; the most penetrating insight explains all things. (Watson 1964, 89)

In an effort to understand the significance of the experience of *li*, it is, I think, necessary to dwell on the relationship between one's personal ancestor and the ancestor as an ideal, stretching back into the dim past and forward into the limitless future. 'It is in both limiting and stretching oneself that the essential meaning of *li* is formed' (Cheng 2001, 498). This experience of *li* can now be linked back to the previous discussion on worldviews and cultural distinction, as only with an appreciation of the concept could the distinctive Chinese worldview develop. The Chinese culture, expressed as it often is as that of the literati, was a unifying mechanism, as cultures always are, and it was the concept of *li* that held and conditioned the people. 'So long as the customary practices of the people could be explained as consistent with *li*, they were tolerated and unity was maintained' (Dennerline 1988, 164). The Chinese understanding of the power of social conditioning, as shown by the works of Xunzi and other literati throughout Chinese history highlights the importance and efficacy of ritual in Chinese culture (Ropp 1990, xvii).

4:6 Conclusion

This chapter expresses the core sentiments of the thesis and addresses the main hypothesis –concerning the intrinsic importance of ancestor worship in Chinese

culture. It engages with a particular symbolic-hermeneutical understanding of culture that has been articulated and reinforced throughout this work. The cognitive aspects are emphasized in this chapter and culture is seen to emerge from the conditions and subsequent worldview of a people. From the worldview emerges values; from the inherent values comes a hierarchy of values and a set of strategies and plans enabling, ideally and actually, these values, as a set of goals, to be realized.

Ancestor worship, including its corollaries, was integral in the origination and inception of Chinese culture, and in its continuing motivation. Ancestor worship, expressed in another way is the ritualized concern for the biological (links); a strategy; a concern for the social; and its cultural outcome. Expressed rather inadequately, (due to their limitations which are addressed by the thesis overall), but necessarily, in philosophical and religious terms, the cultural strategies of the Chinese, their worldview, ethos, way of thinking, is shown to be unique. Chinese distinctiveness, its cultural uniqueness, emerges from the complex interaction between the way of life and the environment to produce a Chinese form of life (*Lebensform*). Using the categories of change, positive and negative (optimism), harmony, and vagueness, the difference between the development of Chinese thought and Greek inspired Western thought, is made apparent. Also made clear is the association of ancestor worship to the Chinese cultural distinctions.

Ancestor worship is often thought of in religious terms to the detriment of its significance as the prime cultural paradigm. This argument is discussed more fully in the chapter on Confucianism. However, here and in the previous chapter, the role and the nature of religion and God/gods, and how they are apprehended in Chinese culture

are discussed. An important point which emerges from these philosophical discussions is the social role of ancestor worship and its strategic function and significance in Chinese culture. Here I draw the connections between the religious, the philosophical, and the biological with the social. *Xiao* and *li*, that is filial piety and ritual, are introduced as important aspects of this strategy – aspects that will be dealt with at length in the following two chapters.

This chapter's importance to the thesis is that it builds upon and reinforces the previous chapter and therefore the overall approach of giving evidential precedence to 'what the Chinese were doing' throughout their cultural journey, as opposed to what a particular text or author supposes or suggests they were doing, or, more importantly, what they were thinking. It also, in connection with the first chapter, exemplifies the hermeneutical approach that this thesis has taken

Furthermore the symbolic approach is now more apparent as ancestor worship as a symbol of a significant cultural trait is examined, not by analysis, as one might do by analyzing a particular action in an anthropological study of say, West Town, but by looking at the connections that made the particular action in West Town a cultural *significant* and then by looking at that *significant*, in this case ancestor worship, and looking at its connections. These connections are highlighted throughout this chapter, and when considered as a cultural whole (and when they are further enhanced and elaborated in coming chapters), they make it clear that ancestor worship is at least an alternative cultural paradigm, and perhaps even a better cultural paradigm than the current master narrative of Confucianism. This thesis argues that there is an over-reliance on texts, classical and philosophical, in trying to understanding Chinese

culture. It is clear from recent research that these texts were not at all representational of the vast majority of the population. Furthermore, more recent evidence infers that ‘veneration of ancestors was practised by much of the population; it has remained a central concern until today’ (Overmeyer 1995, 125).

The social strategies and their incumbent social mores which originated in ancestor worship profoundly influenced not only the religious and philosophical views of the Chinese, but also the socio-political orders.

Within the family, the kin members both here and in the world beyond are held together in a network of role relationships ideally governed by the spirit of peace, harmony and ritual decorum. Here the value of order is central...As a model for the socio-political order, it projects the picture of an immanent order based on networks of clearly defined roles and statuses and ideally held together by a system of sacred ritual .(Schwartz 1985, 31)

The aim of this chapter has been to begin the exposé of the pattern of meanings of Chinese culture and to explore the world of thought and the shared cultural assumptions of the Chinese (as they practised ancestor worship). Chinese philosophy and religion assist this aim as they articulate the worldviews and its inherent values as expressions of the fundamental beliefs of a people. Starting at the beginning, in the dim Neolithic and ancient Classical past not only assists in finding those inceptive conditions of Chinese philosophy and religion, but it has an element of distance which is more efficacious in considering cultural distinction.

Our examination shows the positive nature of Chinese thought, the way it perceives change, and the positive way it considers death. Here we begin to see the connection with the ancestors, noting that the delineation between divine or metaphysical with the human world is indistinct. This religious or philosophical vagueness helps to explain the close connection to the ancestors and then to the social world. This close ancestral connection – a biological-social connection - shows the crucial role of the ancestors, kinship, and family in the entire development of Chinese civilization.

Ancestor worship, as a means of conceptualizing change, provides a link between past, present and future, also linking the philosophical and religious to the social and political. Ancestor worship also helps make clear why the one overriding concern of the Chinese has been their focus on the biological and social, and its continuation. The significance of the ancestors is a social significance. Although they do have a central position in the religious realm, and they have an important originative position in Chinese philosophy, the real power of the ancestors, in regards to their exemplary position in Chinese culture, lies in the social realm. This social significance is explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Living with the Ancestors: Filial Piety

Ancient Chinese wisdom has this to say about filial piety:

A superior man is devoted to the fundamentals (root). When the root is firmly established, the moral law (*Tao*) will grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity (*ren*). (*Analects* 1.2. Chan 1963, 31)

The reading above indicates a particular characteristic of China's culture has been its serious concern with filial piety towards parents, ancestors, heirs, family and kin. The emphasis on family is extended to the state and by inference to the nation. This chapter engages with the discourse of the family and filial piety. The dominant social strategies and their incumbent social mores which originated in ancestor worship profoundly influenced not only the religious and philosophical views of the Chinese, but also the socio-political orders. The core sentiments and the main hypothesis of the thesis are addressed –that is, that ancestor worship and its connections and corollaries were integral in the inception of Chinese culture and in its continuing motivation.

An important element of this chapter is to reinforce and re-emphasize connections. As a cultural connection, filial piety connects the biological with the social and the political. Filial piety confirms the individual, as a member of a larger family-kin-ancestor web, as the nexus in this *web of significants* that is Chinese culture. Its biological connections allow communication across space and time.

Ancestor veneration and worship stressed social unity and social order. It is primarily concerned with the continuity and survival of the ancestors and the present generation as future ancestors. Expressed in another way, ancestor worship is a ritualized concern for the biological (links), leading to a concern for the social, and a strategy for achieving the outcomes of this social concern. Conversely, one of the significant correlates of ancestor worship is to be found in the social realm. Here the connections between the religious, the philosophical, and the biological with the social are exposed and made clear. The importance of the social realm in Chinese culture; the importance of the family in Chinese society; and the central role of filial piety (*xiao*) in the family and its influence extending to the wider social world, and even to the cosmos are stressed.

Other cultures and the religions important to those cultures also stressed the 'functional needs of the societies and governments they served in the course of their history' (Jochim 1986, 78-80). Of course the concern for family and indeed the ethics of filial piety are common to many if not most cultures, and are not unique to China. However, Chinese culture is distinctive in the amount of attention paid to and the importance claimed for this particular virtue (Ivanhoe 2004, 189). Gary Hamilton (1990, 77) provides a sociological view of this difference when he argues that in 'Western society legitimate domination is seen as the intentional, directional, and consequential acts of individuals acting within the boundaries of their jurisdictions', whereas 'in China ...it is seen as an aspect of specific sets of social roles, and hence as impersonal, non-intentional, and harmony-seeking.' In China, 'familism (along with ancestor worship) was the oldest and most basic of Chinese religious

conceptions. Filiality, the root of familism¹⁷, was praised in all the ancient scriptures' (Jochim 1986, 78-80). This overriding concern with family is distinctively Chinese and describes 'a system in which all ideas and behaviour were judged by whether or not they contributed to the well being of the family' (Eastman 1988, 15).

Although some of [filial piety's] component ideas (obedience for example) are shared by other cultures, filial piety surpasses all other ethics in its historical continuity, the proportion of humanity under its governance, and the encompassing and imperative nature of its precepts. The attributes of intergenerational relationships governed by filial piety are structural, enduring, and invariable across situations within Chinese culture. They may be generalized to apply to authority relationships beyond the family, and they are thus potent determinants of not only intergenerational but also superior-subordinate interactions. (Ho 1996, 155)

From its very cultural beginning filial piety held an almost absolute position in Chinese onto-cosmology and it became 'something so exalted in their minds that it becomes difficult for us of another culture to appreciate today' (Holzman 1998, 185). It is in an examination of its correlations and connections that such an appreciation may come to fruition.

Family, kinship and clanship, and the ancestors have a profound, entrenched and inherent relationship with the political, economic and social systems in traditional Chinese society (Hsieh 1968, 174, 183). This is evidenced by the importance attached to social harmony, and of the significance of Confucianism and the Confucian

¹⁷ So important was the institution of the family that the term *familism* has been coined to characterize Chinese social values and organization (Eastman 1988, 15).

doctrine of filial piety throughout Chinese history. Filial piety (*xiao*) is supported by an understanding of the mutual interconnectedness between self, parents and ancestors, and a devotion and piety to continue that concept of identity and relationship. 'It involves a heightened awareness that one not only owes one's existence to parents and ancestors but also has been shaped by them to become the kind of person one is' (Shun 2003, 793).

It is the family and not the individual that is the basic unit of humanity in China, and it has been that way since the beginning. The doctrine of filial piety is fundamental and essential to Chinese ethical and social life. One of the more significant cultural strategies of Chinese civilization has been the value it has given to social harmony and solidarity and its various means of achieving this aim. China's success in being able to maintain a highly organized and complex society over such a vast area for such a length of time is due to its emphasis on the social realm and especially on the social institution of the family. This family-dominated social realm was maintained by 'deeply ingrained patterns of behavior' which 'are among the oldest and most persistent social phenomena in the world' (Fairbank 1992, 18). The Chinese family was, at one and the same time, an economic unit...a religious unit...and a social security organization. (Eastman 1988, 16)

The concept of filial piety was already in use in Chinese culture generally before it became an integral and important value ethic in Confucianism, where 'it enjoyed a primary position of importance' (Yin 2004, 141). Filial piety was mentioned seventeen times in the *Analects* and twenty seven times in the *Mencius* (4A26) where it makes it clear that to fail to extend the family line by not having children [and let

the ancestors be forgotten] are the most heinous ways to be unfilial, and unfiliality was 'thought to be a most serious crime, an attitude that continued for most of Chinese history' (Holzman 1998, 188). Here, filial piety covers not only duty towards one's parents, 'but also indirect filial duty towards one's clan to carry on the family line so that ancestors will continue to be worshipped by the future generations' (Yin 2004, 142).

Besides the supreme importance given to the family in Chinese society, immense worth was also placed upon the relationship between father and son. 'It was universally accepted as the most important human relationship' (Baker 1979, 102). However, this hierarchical relationship gains its importance not only as a relationship between father and son, but as it is extended to other social relationships by example and analogy. The degree of importance placed upon this social relationship may be inferred by its inclusion in the Confucian canon as the *Classic of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing)* which is an attempt to extend the social relationships within the family into the political sphere, and by analogy to compare the relationship (especially) of the father and son to the ruler and the ruled. The *Classic of Filial Piety* brought serving the monarch into the sphere of filial piety:

One serves one's mother in the same manner in which one serves one's father, and the love towards them is the same. One serves one's monarch in the same the same. Therefore to serve the monarch with filial piety is to show loyalty; to serve the senior with reverence is to show obedience. Not failing in loyalty and obedience in the service of one's superiors, one will be able to preserve one's emolument and position and to carry on one's family sacrifices. (Yin 2004, 147)

This relationship between filial piety and politics is examined in detail below.

However, it is filial piety's relationship to the social realm, and the social realm's position above all other realms which are the most important features of Chinese culture. One of the early and most respected of Chinese writers, Xunzi (c. 298-238 BC), in his *Discussion of Rites* (Watson 1965, 89) expressed succinctly the wisdom and underlying strategic thinking inherent within Chinese culture when he wrote that humans are prone to make excessive demands to satisfy their passions, and that social control mechanisms, such as that gained by practicing the rituals of ancestor worship, are necessary for the well being of society. Here Xunzi is simply articulating the reasons behind the social and cultural strategy, noting its necessity and its means. What is not apparent in Xunzi's statement is the extent that the social realm, and especially as it relates to the political, is prioritized over all other realms. This is exemplified in the literature of the early times. 'Nearly all the authors [of early Chinese literature]...whether poets, historians, or philosophers, were at the same time government officials, or members of philosophical schools which sought official sanction and support' (Watson 1962, 5).

The Chinese character for filial piety shows an old man being held up by a child – obviously showing the parent-child relationship. Here, in the important cultural value and ensuing strategy of filial piety, is to be found another cultural distinction, which by its sheer contrast, leads to a better understanding of Chinese culture. In the previous chapter I discussed a Chinese cultural difference in relation to change and to what Cheng Chung-ying (2001, 497) has called the *Zhou Yi* way of thinking where the 'deep experience of ancestral unity' leads to a world view of 'totality, interdependence, transformation and return.' Here, with filial piety, we find a similar

outcome. Filial piety may be considered the social transformation of the *Zhou Yi*, and the social realm may be considered to have been extended to include the ancestral realm. To be filial is to remember one's parents and to maintain memory of the past. 'Those who are inclined to value the past maintain intimate relations with their roots – "inter-dependence" and "predictability". Interrelating with the collective, they are no longer absorbed with mere individual goals' (Isay 2005, 450). Filial piety as a supremely important social virtue was 'not the kind of lineage virtue that would have been validated by the independence and unpredictability of the Mesopotamian and Greek gods and heroes' (Keightley 1990, 45). The emphasis on filial piety in Chinese culture is a response to a need for harmony and control – for dependence and predictability. As an organizing metaphor, filial piety projects itself from the family to the social community and political institutions, and thence to the cosmos in the form of harmony (Hsieh 1968, 170).

The *Analects* define filial piety this way: 'When parents are alive serve them according to ritual, when dead bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual'. This statement tells us that filial piety is concerned with the rituals (*li*) of ancestor worship. It is a quasi-religious concern, and it is this religiosity which provides the approval of, and endorsement for filial piety (Baker 1979, 105). By implication it also suggests an awareness and knowledge of the ancestors which in turn provided the font of meaning for the important values within Chinese culture – filial piety being the strategic outcome of these values and family continuity the goal. Ancestor veneration, worship and piety¹⁸ emphasized in particular those aspects of the family that stressed unity and order – a requirement for continuity and survival of the

¹⁸ I again stress the use these terms interchangeably to underpin their synthetic nature; their meaning-in-use, and their connections.

ancestors and the present generation as future ancestors. Further reading of the ancient texts also tells us that filial piety is concerned with the orderly and harmonious operation of the family and by extension to the ruler and the state. Chinese society was built up on the basis of filial piety, which has penetrated into every corner of Chinese life and influenced every aspect of Chinese society. Its traditions, religious life, social life and political life show the influence of this ethical practice and these lines from the *Great Learning* (I.4.) indicate this influence:

In order to rightly govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family; in order to put the empire in peace and prosperity, it is necessary first to regulate the state...prior to setting up of a community or a state, there must be a social unit called the family.

Filial piety is essentially a unifying and strengthening strategy of Chinese culture. An edict from Emperor Chengzu in the Ming Dynasty recognized this and decreed that 'there are five human relationships, the sovereign and the parents are the most important. Serving his parents with filial piety, thus his loyalty can be transferred to his sovereign' (Yin 2004, 151).

For a small but influential part of Chinese society, understood as the elite literati, government officials and potential officials, or the *Ru* or Confucians, self development was seen as a most important value. According to Confucius, to manage the state one has to manage the family first and in order to manage the family well one has to cultivate oneself. Filial piety and its associated rituals are not only the initial step for self development but also the basis for political and social order. The link between filial piety (family) and good and harmonious governance (government)

can be seen in Confucius' observation (*Analects*, 2.21), 'that participation in government need not involve actually taking office but can be a matter of exerting one's influence through *xiao* [filial piety]' (Shun 2003, 795).

Filial piety was not just a matter of reverence to the father (or parent, older brother, senior person or ruler), it was also a matter of reciprocity. Reciprocity is an important factor in Chinese culture and society and is clearly seen in Chinese family relationships. The individual understands that he exists by virtue of his interdependent relationship with his ancestors, whereby his ancestors exist through him, and that he will continue to exist only through his descendents. This sense of mutual responsibility and understanding is most apparent between parents and son, and was essential to the successful continuing institution of the family and of Chinese society generally. Of course it is obvious that such mutual responsibility between parents and children is not markedly a Chinese cultural trait as such, but where the Chinese situation differed significantly from the Western, apart from the obvious higher value and emphasis, was in the continuing piety of the son after the death of the parent. 'Death did not release the son from his duty to his parents; it merely altered the form which his duty took' (Baker 1979, 71-72). Filial piety is not, though, a requirement for absolute compliance to parental authority. It is more a respectful attitude which demands reverence and veneration (Tu 1990, 118) towards our direct source of life, our biological links, our parents and ancestors.

5:1 Filial piety's connection with ancestor worship

Recently unearthed silk and bamboo texts from early China have added to our understanding of the role of filial piety in early Chinese thought (Chan 2004, 3) and it

is becoming increasingly clear that ‘filial piety or, more exactly, ancestral piety, was an essential element in ancient religion and thus in ancient life in general’ (Holzman 1998, 186). It was ancestor worship, reverence, or piety that coloured the entire social realm, and it is piety within the family and directed towards the parents (the closest ancestors), but especially the father, that we now refer to as filial piety. The roots of filial piety probably arose in Neolithic burial customs (Keightley 1990, 45), but direct evidence of filial piety ‘first appeared on Shang or early Zhou bronze vessels, where the concept of filial piety was already well developed’ (Yin 2004, 141).

Although it is generally thought that filial piety was more a social matter (dealing with parents only) and therefore less a religious matter (dealing with ancestors), I favor the argument that although attitudes and values within Chinese culture have changed over time, filial piety and therefore ancestral piety and worship, have changed little. There is ample evidence to conclude that filial piety extended from the social realm to include the more numinous, religious, meta-physical world of the ancestors. One line of argument (Baker 1979, 83) is that

‘[I]f the parents when alive needed food, clothing, shelter and money, and if the after-life closely resembles this life, then the parents when dead would continue to need food, clothing, shelter and money. To supply them with these essentials was one of the fundamental purposes of ancestor worship.’

In Arthur Waley’s (1949, 38) view, founded partly on evidence from the *Shijing* and *Shangshu*, filial piety ‘seems originally to have meant piety towards the spirits of ancestors or dead parents.’ Also based upon a poem from the *Shijing*, Donald Holzman (1998, 187) adds that ‘although we *know* very little about family life in

ancient China...this ancient poem and the fact that Chinese poets have echoed it down to the present day, do suggest real continuity', in that filial piety as a social phenomena has continued unabated from the distant past down to the present day.

The modern Confucianist, Qian Mu (1895-1991), disagrees slightly, but nevertheless argues that, although filial piety was assessed differently at different times, its relationship and influence extended beyond the parents:

Since antiquity, the value of filial piety has undergone many changes. In the more remote stages, this worship of ancestral figures was related to feeding the ancestors with offerings. By the time of Confucius (551-479BC), ancestor worship was adapted to the relations with the more recent dead ancestors and also the living, and gradually, to the relations between superiors and subordinates in public office. (Isay 2005, 442)

A passage from the *Shangshu*, which Holzman (1998, 188) believes was written about 1000BC, 'clearly...shows us that filial piety played an important role in Chinese life during the Zhou dynasty not only in ritual observances of ceremonies for the dead, but in actual filial behaviour towards living parents':

The king said: 'Feng, our hatred of the worst criminals is great indeed! But how much more do we hate those who are not filial or fraternal! When the son does not reverently carry out the orders of his father he wounds the old man's heart grievously. The father cannot love his son, and then begins to hate him. The son's younger brother can no longer think of what Heaven obviously wants him to do, and he can no longer respect his elder brother. The elder brother, moreover, thinks no more of the sadness of his younger brother and is quite lacking in fraternal feelings towards him.

If such men go to extremes [of unfilial conduct] and are not considered criminals by our government, then the law of Heaven given to our people will fall completely into ruin". (Holzman 1998, 188)

Other important texts also provide clear evidence of the links between ancestor worship and filial piety. In *The Doctrine of the Mean* (DOM) Confucius is reported to have said, 'King Wu and Duke Chou were indeed eminently filial. Men of filial piety are those who skillfully carry out the wishes of their [ancestors] and skillfully carry forward their undertakings' (Chan 1963, 106). It also, in another passage, explicitly states that filial piety is connected with the activities of ancestor worship:

[T]o remember the ancestors, to perform the same rites, and the same music which they performed when living, to reverence what they revered, to love what they loved, to serve them after death as they were served during their life, and to serve them though they have disappeared as if they still existed, that is perfect filial piety. (*DOM* 19 in Chan 1963, 106)

Therefore, ancestor worship may easily be seen here as an extension of the piety towards parents, a piety which 'involves paying due respect not only to one's living parents, but also to the deceased and to remote ancestors' (Bi and D'Agostino 2004, 451-467; Hsieh 1968, 179).

The importance of this argument about the links between filial piety and ancestor worship/piety is that filial piety should not be seen as a modern or developed aspect of ancestor worship. Rather it should be seen as a correlate of ancestor worship - one could not exist without the other. The overwhelming empirical evidence such as that

provided by archaeology provides mostly a religious view of filial piety as an action concerned with the dead (ancestors). However, just because there is empirical evidence of the religious aspect of filial piety, this should not preclude us from considering the social aspect, for the religious aspect is after all the one area where relics are expected to be the most abundant – it being difficult to imagine these time consuming artifacts being part of everyday Neolithic or ancient Chinese life.

5:2 The social connection

From ancient times in China filial piety has been understood to be a natural basis for all social behaviour. ‘And the most biological rooted of all human institutions – the family – was likewise to be considered to be a model for all human social organization, including government’ (Jochim 1986, 161). From a functional perspective, the purpose of ancestor worship is social harmony and maintenance of the family centered social structure. Underpinning this interpretation is the classical concept of *yang sheng song si*, (supporting the living and bidding farewell to the dead), a concept that has been effective down to the present in summarizing the essence of filial piety (Yang, 1967, 45). ‘If a Chinese died before his father, the father beat the coffin – symbolically punishing the son for unfilially having abandoned his duties of caring for his parents in this world and the next.’ Lloyd Eastman (1988, 15) points out in this quote that although this ritual act is only a small part of the funeral ceremonies, it focuses on the emphasis of family in ways that are much different from those in the contemporary West. From a strategic and social point of view, ancestor worship was a means of maintaining filial piety as the cornerstone of the ancestor-family-kinship system. The practice of ancestor worship, and especially its social

corollary of filial piety, 'laid stress on precisely those aspects of the moral equipment of the family that tended toward unity and good order' (Baker 1979, 104).

The large family with several children has not been the norm among the Chinese – it is a myth. The large, joint, multi-generational family with several married sons all living within one walled abode is an ideal exception (Fairbank 1992, 21). Due to environmental and economic conditions, and the social mores which abandoned primogeniture, the average peasant family was limited to four, five, or six people in total (Fairbank 1992, 21). But the 'actual' family was not where the values for family originated – it was in the ideal family. Patricia Ebrey (1984, 200-223) informs us the Chinese family throughout its history has been enormously influenced by three ideas – ideas, I would argue, that are easily associated with ancestor worship – filial piety, patriarchy, and patrilineality. 'Marriage,' for example, 'was not an affair forged through instinctive desire alone but was based also on the higher concept of creating new life or lives so as to prolong those of one's ancestors, including ones parents' (Hsieh 1968, 177). Highlighting the association between family practices and ancestor worship, and recalling that this thesis argues for a cultural understanding, it is also noteworthy that Ebrey sees 'the relative high level of standardization of family practices in China across regions, classes, and dialect groups' as an 'intriguing historical contrast between China and the West'. Furthermore, she maintains that:

The Chinese family had little reason to change because it was nearly perfectly constructed of reinforcing strands: ethics, property law, marriage practices, concepts of descent and gender differentiation, even criminal law all served to strengthen fixed principles of family behavior. (Ebrey 1990, 199-200)

As everyone's parents, and by inference also his ancestors, are the source of life, this fundamental blood relationship legally as well as morally dictates the imperative rule that one owes certain unavoidable obligations to his parents (Hsieh 1968, 175).

This 'perfectly constructed social entity,' the Chinese family and the family system, is 'among the oldest and most persistent social phenomena in the world. China has been a stronghold of the family system and has derived both strength and inertia from it' (Fairbank 1992, 18). In response to Fairbanks statement about the Chinese family, Ebrey, I would suggest, has already addressed Fairbank's charge of inertia¹⁹ by asserting that it had no need to change because it was already 'perfect'. But it is his other claim that China had derived strength from the family system that I now want to briefly address, using some of Fairbank's own words.

Referring to the Chinese farming people (in contrast to the West) Fairbank thought that it was 'amazing' that they could 'maintain a highly civilized life' under the relatively poor conditions available to them throughout much of their history. He asserts that it is the family oriented social system that 'carried the individuals of each family through the phases and vicissitudes of human existence according to deeply ingrained patterns of behavior' (Fairbank 1992, 18). As is argued throughout, it is the cultural *significant*, or the cultural strategy of ancestor worship and filial piety, and its function of promoting harmony, stability, and continuity that Fairbank infers when he talks about 'deeply ingrained patterns of behavior'. This focus on the ancestor-family-kinship system, where 'the individual exists by virtue of his descendents, and where his ancestors exist only through him' (Baker 1979, 71), and where the importance of

¹⁹ This charge of inertia is addressed in more detail in the final chapter.

reciprocity and mutual responsibility between family members, (especially the father and son relationship) was clearly discernable, is another cultural distinction par excellence. Where Chinese culture is more organic and emphasizes community, Western culture is atomistic and emphasises individualism.

5:3 The religious connection

The Chinese family, besides being a social, political, and economic unit, was also a religious institution. This religiosity, reinforced by the rituals of ancestor worship, extolled the values of familism. 'The Chinese imperial state similarly acquired a sacred and inviolate character as a result of the diffused nature of the popular religion' (Eastman 1988, 57).

Religion in China 'borrowed much from the religious product of filiality: ancestor worship. Even when we call ancestor worship a religion, the fact remains that its distinctive characteristic is the element of filial piety, an element lacking in every other form of religion' (Addison 1924, 502). 'As we have seen, the genesis of popular gods in China owed much to the ancestral cult' (Jochim 1986, 162). As mentioned above, the earliest appearance of the word filial piety is on a bronze vessel of the Shang or early Zhou era. Most of these early inscriptions indicated filial piety towards parents or kin who had died. It is reasonable to judge that these vessels and their markings of filial piety '*(xiao)* originally referred to a religious act, a form of pious commemoration to one's ancestors' (Holzman 1998, 186). What was most important in Chinese culture was the social realm, and because what is most important or most serious may be considered the subject of a (sociological) view of religion, the social

realm in China may be viewed from a religious perspective, and indeed it often has been. K. C. Yang (1967, 296) viewed ancestor worship in the family as having ‘all the primary qualities of religion diffused into [its] institutional structure.’ Ancestor worship as the religious system was naturally concerned with continuity of the family and it focused on those moral aspects that led to continuity, unity and good order (Baker 1979, 104).

Benjamin Schwartz (1985, 31), below, provides a clear overview not only of how the religious and the social are connected, but also the connections between the political and the wider worldview.

[The] powerful model of social order which we find in ancestor worship may have profoundly coloured the entire “elite cultural” religious views of both the socio-political and cosmic orders. Within the family, the kin members both here and in the world beyond are held together in a network of role relationships ideally governed by the spirit of peace, harmony and ritual decorum. Here the value of order is central. As a metaphor for the cosmos, it suggests a world of entities and energies held together in familial harmony under the authority of the high god. As a model for the socio-political order, it projects the picture of an immanent order based on networks of clearly defined roles and statuses and ideally held together by a system of sacred ritual.

The role of religion (as such) in understanding China and in China’s history is much misunderstood. If we were to heed the advice of many of the early Western commentators, especially some of the early sinologists who were also Christian

missionaries, we might conclude that China was not really religious, nor that it could effectively be understood in a religious sense. For them

China [was] primarily a country of heathen who lacked the light of God and must be rescued from eternal damnation. Consequently even the best minds...and Confucius himself were necessarily consigned to a level of inferiority as compared with Europeans, while the masses were exposed to what the American missionary Wells Williams described as 'a kind and degree of moral degradation of which an excessive statement can scarcely be made, or an adequate conception hardly be formed.

(Dawson 1967, 134)

However, he was wrong and an 'adequate conception' could be formed. As K.C. Yang so emphatically points out, 'the undervaluation of the place of religion in Chinese society did not find much support from reality.' Temples, shrines, and altars are ubiquitous in China, and, 'every traditional Chinese home was a religious shrine, for it contained spirit tablets of the ancestors, and pictures and idols of many household deities' (Yang 1967, 16). Of crucial importance and significance to Chinese (religious) family life and Chinese culture was the worship of ancestors, a fact indicated by the almost universal keeping of family altars. This public and private display of worship stood as 'a visible indication of the strong and pervasive influence of religion in Chinese society, for they stood as symbols of social reality' (Yang 1967, 16).

To be sure, this was not the same type of religion to be found in the West where the object of worship was a supreme, originating, and creative God. However it may still be compared to Western religion in that

Filial piety in China came to be seen as having absolute value and that the worship of one's parents can be compared to the worship of God in the West. For the Chinese, their only creators are their parents and ancestors. Love for God in the West is replicated by filial piety for parents in China. (Holzman 1998, 198)

Although this comparison is both of a religious and a philosophical nature, it also contains a wider cultural problem for Western interpreters: the Chinese from very ancient times, held filial piety in a very lofty position and 'treated it as something one might almost call an absolute, metaphysical entity' (Holzman 1998, 198). Baker (1979, 103) sees filial piety and ancestor worship as two distinct phenomena. However, he also sees them combined with 'other religious features' and with other 'powerful urges to conformity in family and state', as 'what was meant by those people who have spoken of "Confucianism"'. Here he is, I venture to claim, referring to Confucianism as the Chinese cultural meta-narrative, a position this thesis aims to change. Patricia Ebrey (1984, 200) sees filial piety as an ethical concern, and with this we could place it either with religion or philosophy. However the relationship between religion, filial piety, and the social realm is construed, it has always in some manner been central in Chinese culture and was very seldom if ever called into question. As Wolf (1974, 131) reminds us, 'the most important point to be made about Chinese religion is that it mirrors the social landscape of its adherents'. Given that scenario, filial piety is most definitely a religious practice, but it must always be considered with its connections and correlates, the family, kin, ancestors, the other wider realms.

Where ancestor worship laid stress on generation, with the ancestor superior to the descendent, filial piety required a similar order of precedence in the family and in the wider social realm. From a religious view which concerns itself with the social realm, ancestor worship gives primacy to the family-kinship group as a paradigm of social order. This social order transcends 'the world of the living, and the numinous world of the dead may indeed enormously reinforce the sense of the "ontic" reality of role and status and of the order in which they are embedded' (Schwartz 1985, 22).

Although I have been speaking about Chinese religion as though it were a synonym for Chinese ancestor worship, I am speaking about it in one sense only, and that is in the sociological sense where it is just concerned with what is the most serious and important issues in life. In another more conventional sense, there are of course many variants in Chinese religion.

The Chinese tolerated a range of religious belief and practice which is staggering in its breadth. Ancestor worship [incorporating filial piety] may well have been the most systematically viewed, was probably the most ancient, and was certainly the most widely practiced religious element, but it existed side by side with many other beliefs. (Baker 1979, 106)

The traditional three religions of China are Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. It is well known filial piety was very important to Confucianism as is made clear above and below. However, Buddhism went to considerable lengths to incorporate Confucian ethics into its canon in order to have a widespread appeal and a special Buddhist doctrine of filial piety was created and extended, according to Ch'en, in the following three ways:

First, by pointing out the numerous sutras in the Buddhist canon which stress filial piety; second, by forging a body of apocryphal literature which emphasizes piety as its central theme; and third, by contending that the Buddhist concept of filial piety was superior to that of the Confucians in that it aimed at universal salvation (this would include all the previous ancestors in different forms), while the Confucian piety was limited to just one family. (Ch'en 1973, 18)

To enhance their appeal, Buddhists argued for a deeper understanding of filial piety and deemed that a person who became a monk or nun could accumulate merit for his or her ancestors. The Buddhist literati also published a large number of treatises which argued for the consistency of Buddhist and Confucian ideas of filial piety (Yao 2000, 234).

Central to the Daoists efforts in the process of transformation was the incorporation of Confucian ethics, especially ethics and filial piety, into Daoist religious doctrines (Yao 2000, 230). 'Daoism learnt from Buddhism how to integrate filial piety into its teachings' although 'as a religious Daoist concept, *xiao* is ultimately concerned with universal salvation' (Chan 2004, 6). For example, He Hong composed his book *Baopuzi* or *The Master who has Embraced Simplicity* in two parts: the inner chapters deal with alchemy, immortal elixirs, methods of prolonging life and driving away evil, while the outer chapters deal with social and family affairs based on Confucian ethics. He maintained that the Daoist cultivation of immortality must be based on the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, humaneness and faithfulness (Yao 2000, 231). Wang Daoyuan, at the beginning of the Ming dynasty, for example, played an important role in the integration of Neo-Confucian doctrine and Daoist practice (Yao 2000, 232),

incorporating Neo-Confucian social ethics into Daoist doctrines and arguing that the Five Constant Virtues (humaneness, righteousness, ritual/propriety, wisdom and faithfulness) were the fundamental way of the world, and that loyalty and filial piety were the path to Daoist truth (Qing 1993, Vol.3, 500-502).

Baker (1979, 105) provides an example of the difference between the philosophical and the religious approach to filial piety when he presents the oft quoted text by Xunzi, noting that ‘the intellectuals of his time were not unaware of the value of religion in social control, while cynically placing themselves above it.’

If people pray for rain and it rains, how is that? I would say: Nothing in particular. Just as when people do not pray for rain, it also rains. When people try to save the sun and moon from being swallowed up [in eclipse], or when they pray for rain in a drought, or when they decide an important affair only after divination - this is not because they think in this way they will get what they see, but only to add a touch of ritual to it. Hence the gentleman takes it as a matter of ritual, whereas the common man thinks it is supernatural. He who takes it as a matter of ritual will suffer no harm; he who thinks it is supernatural will suffer harm. (*Xunzi: 17, Concerning Heaven*, in De Bary 1965, 103)

There has been throughout Chinese history, an awareness of the social impact and indeed the necessity for ancestor worship as a cultural strategy by the educated elite. For them it was more a rational (logical and philosophical) factor, rather than a religious factor, and it is to a philosophical view as articulated by the *Classics*, as opposed to a religious view, of the social importance of ancestor worship, that I now turn.

5:4 The *Classical* connection

As noted above, other religions also stressed the importance of the family, although not to the degree of the Chinese, yet it is equally interesting that in Western philosophy the family was often neglected (Solomon 1993, 15).

Bourgeois ideology expended so much of its attention on abstract universals that it virtually forgot about the social and sexual bases of everyday life. If there is a single omission that should shock us in its persistence, it is the almost total absence of explicit awareness of the family and the local community in an ideology self-consciously concerned with everyday human life and happiness. In Kant, for example, the entire fabric of human morality and practical reason could be described without a single analysis of interpersonal relationships. (Solomon 1993, 16)

However this was definitely not the case when it came to Chinese philosophy and the Chinese *Classics*. The Confucian canon and its teachings regarding filial piety have been ‘for four thousand years [in] the most important place in Chinese ethics and also in the Chinese cultural tradition as a whole’ (Hsieh 1968, 167-170). However, these ethics did not rely on systems of theory, nor even on language or words, ‘but in energetic striving for *practice*²⁰’ (Hsieh 1968, 169).

The *Classical* understanding of filial piety cannot be understood without reference to filial piety in its social, religious, symbolic and psychological categories. It is already made clear that filial piety was an absolute, critical, and central concept in Chinese

²⁰ My emphasis – noting the priority of practice in Chinese thought, and the priority of practice as a theory for this thesis regarding the understanding of Chinese culture – an interesting juxtaposition.

culture. Filial piety, an inadequate but most common translation for *xiao*, and its relationship aspects between father and son, transcended the family sphere to become an extremely influential concept in other social relationships, and also in other non-social relationships including the natural and cosmological world.

Filial piety is undoubtedly important in Chinese culture, and Confucianism has always adopted a positive attitude towards filial piety. 'This does not mean however that its advocacy of filial piety is straightforward and unproblematic,' for it has always been 'open to interpretation...and competing interests' (Chan 2004, 3-4). The role of filial piety, *xiao*, in Confucius' and Mencius' philosophies (which are not, I argue, correlates of Chinese culture) is not as important as benevolence (*ren*), although it is an important factor within it. Where Mencius does mention it he does not condemn it, mostly finding praise for it and finally fitting it into in his system as a first step towards universal love. 'Mencius is known in later tradition for his defence of filial piety against Yang Chu, the individualist, and Mo Tzu, the exponent of universal love' (De Bary 1965, 97). By making a special point of it, he gave added importance to filial piety among the Confucian virtues. Daoists are less certain in their philosophical position toward filial piety. Sometimes, as in the *Zhuangzi*, there are criticisms of filial piety, whereas in other parts it is considered as 'fundamental to human psychology' (Holzman 1998, 189). It is mentioned or referred to in many of the Chinese classical (philosophical) works, and it 'forms the subject of the *Classic of Filial Piety*,²¹ a very early work which came to form part of the Confucian canon. In this text filial piety is described as 'the basis for cosmic and human activity' with

²¹ I will say more about this book and its importance in the section below.

‘Heaven, Earth, and man all following filial piety in their actions and movements’ (Holzman 1998, 192).

Many Western commentators see filial piety as having an ethical basis. For Patricia Ebrey filial piety evokes ‘the set of ethical ideas, generally associated with Confucianism, which came to provide an explicit ideology of the proper basis for family life.’ Here she is referring to the notion that each person has a station and corresponding role in the social structure and is morally bound to fulfill the role obligations of that position. Ebrey also implies that these moral obligations had a somewhat immoral role in that they were merely a social means for the ruling elite to control the people. This is the general position taken by many sinologists, though I would argue a flawed position of a discourse surrounding Confucianism as an elitist tool. I shall comment on this later as it is here a distraction, but it is sufficient to say that this discourse tends to undermine the very important position of filial piety in Chinese culture.

Holzman (1998, 188-9) also sees the ethical basis of filial piety when he writes that ‘filial piety is exalted as the root of all virtue’. Although he also sees (correctly) that the focus is on filial piety towards the emperor and the official hierarchy, he also makes it clear that an equal emphasis is on filial piety in the family.

5:5 The political connection

Much of what has been written about the social, religious and philosophical aspects of filial piety tend to inevitably lead to some kind of political interest. Reaching into other domains or realms, the social concept of filial piety and its emphasis on family

sometimes comes into conflict with the political structure and its relationship with the social structure, and loyalty to the monarch or leader comes into question. 'The *Classic of Filial Piety* was written to promote filial piety and to coordinate filial piety and loyalty in case of conflict' (Yin 2004, 145).

The *Classic of Filial Piety* is a Confucian text meant to make clear the concept of filial piety. It is a short manuscript and its date and authorship is unclear although it seems likely to be of the Han period. The book was part of the Seven Classics in the Han Dynasty and one of the Thirteen Classics in the Song dynasty. In the *Classic of Filial Piety* the concept of filial piety was reworked into a single and practical doctrine where the social and political obligations coincide and work together with the important practice of ancestor worship.

The book begins by saying that

Filial piety is the root of all virtues, and from which all teaching comes...The body, the hair and the skin are received from our parents, and we do not injure practice of the Way, so as to make our name famous in future generation and glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety. Filial piety begins with the serving of our parents, continues with the serving of our ruler, and is completed with the establishment of our own character. (Yin 2004, 146)

The purpose of filial piety is ultimately human success and prosperity. The Chinese worldview has the ancestor-descendent metaphor extended by way of the father-son metaphor to include the larger community, and even the universe. Chinese political life, as a consequence of this extension, plays a most significant part in Chinese

culture. This cultural strategy gave value to ‘age over youth, for the past over the present, for established authority over innovation’ and in doing so it has ‘provided one of the great historic answers to the problem of social stability. It has been the most successful of all systems of conservatism’ (Fairbank 1992, 53).

Ignoring for the moment Fairbank’s charges of anti-innovation and conservatism, he does, though, recognize the connection of the psychology of filial piety with the overall cultural imperatives and with the political realm. Another eminent historian and sinologist, Jacques Gernet (1982, 27), agrees but goes further when he proposes that a particular and exceptional quality of Chinese culture is that over its extensive history it developed ‘complex forms of political organization which were the most highly perfected in the history of human societies.’ Gernet found it ‘astonishing and remarkable’ that when compared to Europe in size, history, and diversity the Chinese were able to maintain a stable and unified society, and a continuous culture. Charles Hucker (1973, 552) writes in a similar vein:

Among the arts in which the Chinese are habitually considered to have eminent success, government has always ranked very high. To be sure, China’s troubles during the past century...have weakened the awed admiration with which outsiders were once accustomed to regard the Chinese state,...on balance, in the long perspective of history, Chinese government has served China’s national needs remarkably well...No one would dare to generalize about a European state system or even a western state system enduring from pre-Christian times to the present.

These comparisons with Europe and therefore Western culture are important when we consider the success of these cultural strategies such as filial piety, and their

relationship with ancestor worship, as they highlight the socio-political focus of Chinese culture, and the enduring success of this focus on the social and the political.

However, although Chinese society is presented here as being historically ‘dominated by state power...it would be an error’ Fairbank writes, ‘to imagine ancient China as an embryonic nation-state’ and to apply standards and structures associated with modern socio-political structures to the Chinese model. Furthermore, he asserts, ‘we would do better to apply the idea of culturalism and see ancient China as a complete civilization comparable to Western Christendom, within which nation-states like France and England became political sub-units that shared their common European culture.’ Gernet (1982, 28) developed this political dominance theme further by highlighting the importance of the political sphere in Chinese culture and its supremacy over the other major spheres, the military, religious and economic, which so often dominate most other cultures. He sees this as a particularly important cultural characteristic. Due the dominance of the political function, ‘economic activity could not attain in China, any more than religious or military activities, the same degree of autonomy or specificity as in other civilizations.’

However, while it is vitally important to recognize the ‘dominance of the political function’ which Gernet and others put forward, it should not be equated with some form of ‘banal despotism’ as is most often the claim. It is erroneous to see in the state’s regulations of family inspired morals, ‘only a pretext, a sort of alibi for a tyrannical regime; it is in fact the expression of a privileged mode of political action which has lasted down to our day’ (Gernet 1982, 29). It seems most likely that ‘most emperors and officials seemed to have genuinely shared the popular belief in a

transcendental realm whose inhabitants could affect the affairs of mortals' (Eastman 1988, 58), although it is also most likely that state religious rites 'also served the very practical function of helping to maintain peace, order, and obedience among the common people.'

Keeping in mind the cultural, political, and social differences between traditional China and modernity as it is juxtaposed with the West, any outdated leap to judgment concerning how we might think of this political dominance should avoid modern ideas of totalitarianism and despotism. The more efficacious paradigm is perhaps that proposed by 'Etienne Balaz (1964), who called it a government by "officialism"' (Fairbank 1992, 45). These officials or civil servants were men who were selected by examination which 'tested their grasp of classical and historical literature...The longevity and the general conservation of the traditional state system are due primarily to its domination by such men' (Hucker 1973, 561-2). The state has always been the central power in Chinese society and ethical behavior and ritual have always been central to any consideration of good governance in China. In fact, according to Gernet (1982, 81), the sovereign did not in practice (with some notable exceptions) have this 'arbitrary power of command; rather he embodied the power of setting things in order and prompting action'.

We might better understand this position by going back and having a closer look at how filial piety normatively engaged with political power. For a start, 'The duty of a man was first to his parents and only second to the state' (Baker 1979, 79).

He was absolved from responsibility for reporting crimes committed by the father, except in the case of treason. As an official, even one holding a lofty position such as

prime-minister, he was expected to mourn the death of a parent, and often this meant ceasing duties for lengthy periods, often up to a year, or sometimes two or three. This statutory time of mourning varied throughout Chinese imperial history both in time and in application.

Until very recently the hierarchical values inherent within the (ideal) Chinese family have been transferred to the state en masse – the state being an expanded version of the family. Unlike the West and its political values, it was the family and not the individual that was the locus of political life in the social realm. ‘The filial piety and obedience inculcated in family life were the training ground for loyalty to the ruler and obedience to the constituted authority in the state’ (Fairbank 1992, 18)

The correlation between the ethical norms of the family and the polity is clear. John C. H. Wu (1968, 220) understands this correlation between ethics and governance when he writes:

If you cultivate your virtues so that harmony reigns in your own person, your goodness will radiate its influence around the fireside so that harmony will reign in the family. If one family is perfectly harmonious, it will gradually but surely influence other families. If all families are perfected, the state will enjoy peace and harmony.

The Book of Rites (X: 45) accentuated this connection:

As the people are taught filial piety and brotherly love at home, with reverence toward the elder and diligent care for the aged in the community, they constitute the

way of a king; and it is along this line that states as well as families will become peaceful. (Hsieh 1968, 182)

Here the family is considered as the foundation of society. ‘In the *Analects* (2: 21) when Confucius was asked why he did not take part in government, he replied by repeating a passage from the *Book of Documents*, “Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government!”’ (Tu 1990, 117). The rationale of this statement is expressed in the *Book of Rites: The Principles of Sacrifice* (Sommer 1995, 35): ‘when loyal ministers serve their sovereign and filial children serve their parents, they act from the same fundamental basis. Here the values of family and kinship, such as harmony and stability, are understood as being automatically transferred to the agency of government. The duty of the government, as is the duty of the father (and before that, the ancestor), is to provide material and security for the people, and as stated at the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of filial piety is human success and prosperity.

This claim of Confucius that filial piety in the family is politically efficacious must be seen in the Confucian framework of the concept *cheng* in regards to politics (Tu 1990, 116). ‘*Cheng* has the meaning of something’s being truly or really the case and is contrasted with *wei*, meaning “false appearance”’ (Shun 2003, 37). In the Confucian canon, *cheng* is an ideal state in which one fully embodies Confucian virtues, and only when one is or has *cheng* will one have the transformative and nourishing effect on others that provides the ideal basis for government (Shun 2003, 38). The ideal of *cheng*, when practised in the family becomes fully embedded into a person’s actions and thoughts, and it is then transferred to the wider political realm. It is used in early

Confucian texts, including *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, *Daxue*, and in the *Zhongyong* where *cheng* is presented as the basis of social and political order. As Xunzi explains in his chapters on political science, economics and ritual, the ruler may bring about order and prosperity in the state on the basis of proper moral principles. Xunzi, like many scholars throughout Chinese history and especially during his times, often referred back to ‘the golden ages of the past’ and the reigns of the sage rulers Yao, Shun, Yu, and the Shang and Zhou kings. However he also advocated the examples of

more recent rulers of virtue, who lived in the less distant past and whose ways are therefore easier to learn about and to practice. He maintained that although political and social conditions inevitably change, human nature and basic moral principle did not, and therefore the principles that were correct and brought order in the past will do so again. (Watson 1964, 5-6)

Here rulers are supposed to govern by moral leadership and exemplary teaching rather than by force. Law and punishment are the minimum requirements for order, but social harmony can only be attained by virtue, which is achieved through ritual performance. To perform ritual is to take part in a communal act to promote ritual understanding. Whether Confucian, or a condition of Chinese culture, as I would argue, this way of thinking has a social force which holds the ruler to govern in a moral manner as the father may rule or govern the household. One of the fundamental Confucian values that ensure the integrity of ritual performance is filial piety. Confucius believed that filial piety was the first step toward moral excellence. Filial piety does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority; rather it demands recognition of and reverence for our source of life.

From the very beginning of Chinese history, the social and political structure in China may be seen as humanistic, beginning with the family, the basic unit in the socio-political system. It was the duty of government to take care of the people, this being an extended version of the family. Filial piety in the family, extended to the larger socio-political system, became the 'mandate of heaven'. This explicit consent to rebellion was a fundamental characteristic of the Chinese political realm, emphasizing that political authority was dependent on moral conformity to the standards of *li* by the observance of both filial piety and ancestor worship. An example of this ideal characteristic may be found in the *Xunzi – The Regulations of a King*:

One starts with general categories and moves to particular ones; one starts with unity and moves to plurality. What begins must end; what ends must begin again; and so the cycle repeats itself without interruption. Abandon this principle, and the empire will fall into decay. Heaven and earth are the beginning of life, ritual practices [of family and ancestors – filial piety and ancestor worship] are the beginning of order...

...

The correct relationship between ruler and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife begin and are carried through to the end, end and begin again. They share the order of heaven and earth, they last for ten thousand generations. They are what is called the great foundation. The rules that govern mourning and sacrificial rites and the ceremonies of the court and the armies are based upon this single foundation.

...

[A true king's] benevolence is the loftiest in the world, his righteousness is the loftiest in the world, his authority is the loftiest in the world. Since he is the most benevolent, the most righteous and has the most authority, there is no-one to oppose

him and he retains the Mandate of Heaven. Should he not be filial and honour and worship his parents and ancestors – there is no guarantee!

(*Xunzi*, 41, 44-45, quoted in Watson 1964)

5:6 Conclusion

The conceptual delineations, or at least the clarity of these delineations between government and politics, filial piety, family, kin and ancestors, are now positively indistinct and blurred. They are delineations only because they are conceptual – reality is that they all belong to a unified and organic whole. The reality of Chinese culture, as it is to be found in Chinese history, is that by the end of the Neolithic era, it was both homogenous and relatively organized. As the socio-political system gradually took shape during the Three Dynasties of the Bronze Age, this fundamental relationship between the ancestor-descendent, the son-father, and ruled-ruler gained wider acceptance. ‘It functioned as the capstone of the social structure, the high priesthood of the ancestor cult, the arbiter of punishments, and the leader in public works, war, and literature’ (Fairbank 1992, 44). Up until the Communist Revolution this socially oriented and ancestral based political system remained intact, and recent studies reveal that ‘familism, the core traditional value, has not just been surviving but has also been authentically lived by urban and highly educated young Chinese’ (Chang 2006, 8), and no doubt their rural counterparts. No European state could compare with the political accomplishments of China. ‘By comparison, European dynasties were provincial potentates... while China had long been a great centralized empire governed by a uniform administrative system’ (Fairbank 1992, 45).

The purpose of this chapter is to reinforce and re-emphasize connections. Filial piety confirms the individual as the nexus in the *web of significant*s that is Chinese culture. The connections outlined above suggest a unified and dynamic world (view) – a worldview not requiring a creator God. Its biological connections allow communication across space and time. Analogically, as a cultural connection, it connects the biological with the social and the political.

Filial piety ‘involves what is markedly Chinese’ (Isay 2005, 441). Filial piety, ‘the homage of children rendered to their parents, is at the very heart of Chinese culture’ (Holzman 1998, 199). Therefore, as filial piety is a cultural correlate of ancestor worship, each depending on the other for conceptual existence, ancestor worship may also be seen as what is ‘markedly Chinese’ and ‘at the very heart of Chinese culture’.

Both ancestor worship and filial piety are concerned with the orderly and harmonious operation of the family and by extension to the ruler and the state. Both imply an awareness and knowledge of the ancestors which in turn provide the important values to be found within Chinese culture with ancestral/parental worship the strategic outcome and family continuity within the harmonious and ordered socio-political realm the (achieved) goal. Ancestor worship and filial piety stressed those aspects of the family that led to unity, order, continuity and survival of the ancestors and the present generation as future ancestors – a continuing and flourishing Chinese society. Filial piety does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority; rather it demands recognition of and reverence for the source of life – parents and their parents and so on: their ancestors. The purpose of filial piety is human success and prosperity. The Chinese extend the family metaphor to include the larger

community, and even the universe. Chinese political and social life plays a most significant part in Chinese culture and is one of the easily recognized strands in the webs of significance.

‘The ancient value of filial piety presents a force with its own logical pattern, meaningfully linking the context of human life. It is furthermore relevant to contemporary discussions of culture’ (Isay 2005, 452). Filial piety (and ancestor worship) has over the past century or more endured in a situation where there have been vast changes to all aspects of Chinese society, yet ‘the traditional sociocultural traits [have] held on with a remarkable tenacity.’ Since the 1930s, the challenge to familism [and to those practices and ideals which support it], has grown, but even today, after another fifty years of political revolution and economic development, the traditional sociocultural traits endure in all areas of Chinese life’ (Eastman 1988, 242).

Although some Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth movement condemned filial piety as “the source of all evil” – having the effect of turning “China into a big factory for the production of obedient subjects” – one of its key figures, Hu Shih, in a speech given in Taiwan in 1954, reversed that extreme iconoclastic attitude toward Chinese classics, and promoted the study of *Xiaojing* specifically. (Chan 2004, 2)

The connections between the social, religious, philosophical, and biological realms within Chinese culture are clear. The importance of the social realm in Chinese culture is unambiguous, as are the importance of the family in Chinese society, the central role of filial piety in the family, and its influence extending to the wider social world.

In its more extended meanings, [filial piety] provided ideological support for social and political inequalities of many sorts, motivating respect for authority of village elders, landlords, official, and the emperor. In the now somewhat dated language of sociology, filial piety was functional, not dysfunctional. It worked. (Ebrey 2004, 122)

Filial piety, as that nexus where all those important connections meet, has a prominent and irreducible correlation with ancestor worship. ‘Whether filial piety is seen as the essence of [Chinese] culture or a burden of the past, it remains integral to the Chinese heart-mind’ (Chan 2004, 2).

Chapter 6

Two Concepts of Ritual and Two Understandings of *Li*

Ritual has always been one of the descriptors commonly used in relation to Chinese culture and to Chinese history. Chinese society, according to Jochim, (1986, 188), ‘brings to mind an image of large-scale ceremony.’ However why ritual has been so important is not made so clear and unambiguous, and often when an attempt is made to explain the importance of ritual, the explanation lacks the depth required for a better understanding of Chinese culture. The meaning we seek of culture is deep, complex, and important (significant) and according to Xunzi, so is the meaning of ritual.

The meaning of ritual is deep indeed. He who tries to enter it with a kind of perception that distinguishes hard and white, same and different, will drown there. The meaning of ritual is great indeed. He who tries to enter it with the uncouth and inane theories of system makers will perish there. The meaning of ritual is lofty indeed. He who tries to with the violent and arrogant ways of those who despise common customs and consider themselves to be above other men will meet his downfall. (*A Discussion of Rites* in Watson 1964, 94)

Through the following analysis of ritual and *li*, this chapter will not only continue to show the significance of the ancestors as a suitable paradigm for understanding Chinese culture, it will also be a confluence of a number of vital concepts and ideas. Besides showing the links between ritual and Chinese culture, it will also show the correlations between ritual and *li*; ritual as communication and culture as communication; and culture understood symbolically as ritual, and ritual

communication. Here the links between the practice of Chinese ancestor worship, ritual, and Chinese culture are made clear.

In order to expose the importance of ritual in Chinese culture and to show its co-relationship with a concern for the ancestors, I will engage the topic in four different, but connected, ways. That is: ritual as an aspect of Chinese culture; ritual and its Chinese translation as *li*; *li* - expanded and connected in its cultural, cosmic and metaphysical modes; and ritual as communication – cultural communication.

6:1 Ritual: As an aspect of Chinese culture

Joseph P. McDermott in his *State and Court Ritual in China* (1999) is correct in noting that ‘ritual has been a central concern of Chinese culture for at least four thousand years’. He sees it as a ‘self-defining activity of rulers and families alike’; as a ‘principle of the cosmos’; and ‘more than just rites of passage’. However, while he rues the lack of scholarly attention to its ‘impact on the organized activities of the Chinese state’ (McDermott 1999, 1), his text exemplifies a continuing discourse, which fails to acknowledge fully the impact and the place of ritual in China. This discourse emphasises the place of ritual as a political concern and fails to note the corresponding impact on the entire culture. More than a political concern however, rituals, especially those associated with ancestor worship, have been central to ‘Chinese culture, and many opinions have been expressed on them by Chinese thinkers over the centuries’ (Yang, C. K. 1967, 44). The importance of ritual to culture and social structure can hardly be exaggerated. As James Watson aptly remarks, ‘If anything is central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese

culture, it is the standardization of ritual.’ The underlying question of this chapter is ‘why was ritual so important?’

Ritual has been an important aspect of Chinese culture from ancient times. It plays a vital role in Chinese culture as a result of the culture specific relationships between the living and the dead, from worldview to human and social values and from these values to the means and ways of achieving those values. The meaning of ritual has connotations of both historical and cultural continuity and also of lack of change (a common charge made towards China), and of an elitist strategy of somehow maintaining the status quo. Like all good ‘myths’, there is a seed of truth in these misunderstandings of ritual. However it is in its wider semantic meanings, explored below, where it becomes most important for an understanding of Chinese culture.

The most common exposition of ritual in Chinese history and culture is encompassed within the political discourse. It concerns its relationship with politics and its ritualist approach to government (*lizhi*). The *lizhi* sentiment is exemplified in the remarks below by John K. Fairbank (1992, 63):

Han thought as recorded in classical writings built upon the concept of mankind as part of nature and upon the special relationship between the ruler and his ancestors, concepts that were already important in Shang thought a millennium earlier...Han rulers’ daily regimen of ceremonies and rites required the guidance of learned men at court....The Han retained the Mandate of Heaven by an imperial cult of ritual observances, beginning with the Liu family ancestors but especially devoted to Heaven. Its attendant cosmology tied together all the phenomena of human

experience and set the stage on which Confucianism by degrees came to play a central role as an official teaching.

A second understanding of ritual is that found within the Confucian discourse of ritualist ethics, a point so often made by Confucius himself when he declared in the *Analects* (13, 18): ‘that a man without virtue had nothing to do with *li* (ritual)’. He could not bear to see the forms of ritual (*li*) gone through by men without reverence in their hearts.

‘These two approaches were closely related in Chinese philosophical discourse throughout the long period of Chinese history down to the Qing dynasty era’ (Chow 2003,646), and although they are correct in themselves, their significance to Chinese culture is weakened by emphasizing these approaches and thereby neglecting other connections, including the overall organic connection with Chinese culture.

We now know that ritual began with ancestral worship during the Neolithic period:

According to recent archaeological finds, the ancient Chinese had settled before the Neolithic period (around 5000BC) in both north-eastern and north western China, centering their tribal community life in ancestral gods (spirits) and natural gods (spirits). In this period, known as Yangshao Culture, Dawenko Culture, Liangche Culture or Hungshan Culture, sacred objects and sites of worship (temples) and burials consistent with the practice of ancestral worship are commonly found. One may regard this time as marking the specific era in the prehistory of China which can aptly be called the Period of Jade, which lasted at least another two millennia... In

fact part of the word *li* refers to the offering of patterned jade for sacrificial ritual.
(Cheng 2001, 496-497)

Clans and tribal communities based on family lineage had become customary during the Period of Jade. The worship of their ancestors provided a worldview imbued with the sense of stability, order, and peace. These ancestral rituals later came to mean all the ritual used in religious ceremonies. As religion included what we might also now refer to as the secular, ritual extended to the court and then to all parts of society. Ritual became a social value and a cultural strategy for ordering and restraining society.

Because they were mainly concerned with sacrifices to ancestors, rather than divine spirits, 'society became more concerned with the welfare of man than with the worship of gods' (Dawson 1978, 93). The fundamental purpose of ancestor rituals was the incorporation and continuation of the family and its extension to kin and to state – society; it was a strategy for the continuation of Chinese culture. 'Even the cultivation of social values such as affection and filial piety, as maintained by the classical interpretations, contributed directly to this end' (Yang, C. K. 1967, 48). Here, in the Chinese ancestral system, materialized as rituals, there is no need to fear death and the unknown 'other', to the extent that was the case for the origins of Western culture. Xunzi, in his *Discussion of Rites*, made it clear that ancestor worship was a positive and even joyful practice which understands the harmonious 'ordering of birth and death':

All rites begin in simplicity, and are brought to fulfilment in elegant form, and end in joy...Through rites Heaven and earth join in harmony...Rites are strictest in their

ordering of birth and death. Birth is the beginning of man, death is his end. When both beginning and end are good, man's way is complete. Therefore the gentleman [regards] both with the same gravity....To be generous in the treatment of the living but skimpy in the treatment of the dead is to show reverence for a being who has consciousness and contempt for one who has lost it. (Watson 1964, 94-97)

For Xunzi, ritual is concerned with all 'aspects of human society. It regulates one's daily life and interaction with others, channels emotions properly, distinguishes civilised patterns of behaviour, and maintains the political order' (Chow 1994, 56).

Xunzi's views on ritual rely on two premises: first, humans can only survive socially in a well-ordered community with others. If left to survive individually humans would succumb to the forces of nature. Second, humans are inherently selfish and, left to their needs and desires, without proper order and constraints, their society would self-destruct. Order means a structure, and the natural order was hierarchical. The experience of hierarchy – as higher and lower and as senior and junior – was an important factor in the conditions which allowed and propitiated the establishment of ritual in ancestral worship. This natural hierarchy was seen as essential in maintaining a holistic totality of order where different places within the hierarchy had particular roles and inherent duties. This natural order or hierarchy was to play an important part in Chinese culture from these early beginnings to the present and from the family to the polity.

In order to maintain a natural hierarchy and good order, effective allocation of assets requires observance of that order and operational rules of conduct:

The allotment of each individual is called *fen* (station), and *fen* are structured in accordance with principles such as kinship, seniority, and socio-political status... A fundamental function of *li* is to distinguish and structure the *fen* of members of society so that all will receive their appropriate amount of resources to fulfil their needs. (Chow 2003, 646)

Ritual was the means by which an appreciation of these rules and their underlying value as virtues was most readily inculcated to society. This included the social values discussed in previous chapters, such as filial piety and its extension to the state and the polity.

Although we speak of hierarchy and order, the realm of the ancestors and those worshipping the ancestors should not be viewed through a lens which favours a philosophy-of presence, as it is still very much a philosophy-of-change. The ritual acts were one means to communicate the importance of this ancestral realm and the onto-cosmological world it so much influenced. In the rituals concerning the ancestors may be found a sense of ‘totality, mutual placement, mutual support, interdependence, and a natural process of transformation and return’ (Cheng 2001, 497). Here in this ancestral cosmos is the beginning of the cognition of the *dao*, the inception of *yi* as change, and eventually a philosophy and way of life dominated by reverence and piety.

Up until the modern era, where the significance of ritual is uncertain, ritual, as a social custom, as a religious rite or as a familial practice, had an enormous impact on the Chinese. However, in philosophical discourse throughout most of this time, the significance of ritual waxed and waned. After Xunzi, it was not until the early Song

and the rise of the *daoxue* movement, and the subsequent *lixue* movement of the later Song and Ming, that ritual was once again a fundamental topic of the literati. Leading philosophers of these times, ‘as an intellectual response to a perceived threat from Buddhism’, penned copious texts on a comprehensive range of rituals ‘pertaining to funerals, burials, mourning and ancestor worship’ (Chow 2003, 650).

Philosophical thought in the late Ming period was directed to a large degree towards the ‘dynamic nature of the mind’ (Chow 2003, 652); however, some writers, especially from the Dongling Academy, began to question this theoretical focus. They began rejecting abstract discussion of human nature, and argued that ‘to dwell on the essence of mind was nothing but empty talk’ (Chow 2003, 652). This ritualist stream gained further impetus and gradually moved into mainstream thought during the Qing period as a response, not to the threat of Buddhism or Daoism as before, but to the conquest of China by the Manchu.

In attempting to understand China via the Confucian tradition, and focussing especially on the neo-Confucian tradition and down to contemporary times with the work of Mou Zongsan and Tu Weiming, the cultivation of personal growth (sagehood) became the more dominant topic. This has been at the expense of a focus on ritual.

Robert C Neville (2003, 531) offers one explanation for this epistemological oversight when he writes:

The explicit emphasis on ritual dropped back from prominence in neo-Confucian discourse ...not because the neo-Confucians did not share the logical point of the

ancients about the ritual constitution of civilization... but because ...the point that ritual was important no longer had to be made.

Continuing this line of analysis, he asserts that a reconstructed study of the signs and symbols of Chinese ritual provides ‘thick’ access to all layers of [culture²²]. With this assertion I would agree. However, I would argue that the epistemological oversight is more an ideological reaction conditioned by Western influence and the West’s ‘bully culture’ (Solomon 1993, 13) as argued in Chapter Two.

6:2 Ritual as *li*

The point has been made clear above and elsewhere that rituals have been crucial in Chinese history and culture. The rituals of ancestors worship are concerned with communicating and understanding important cultural information. However the Chinese term *li*, which is often translated for the English word *ritual* and makes up much of the textual evidence and information used about rituals in China, is difficult to translate. ‘Ritual’, in whatever way it is used in English, does not cover the semantic range of *li* (Chow 2003, 647). This section, along with the following section, will endeavour to cover that semantic range, and comprehensively describe its meaning, thereby showing connections between the rituals of ancestor worship, *li*, and Chinese culture.

Li began as a term for sacrifices to ancestors and deities, and, although it never lost its important inceptive and deep connection with ancestor worship, its meanings later

²² Neville prefers the word ‘civilization’ here, and while semantic differences are important, I think the use of the term culture would not bother him too much. This chapter of his is in fact titled ‘Philosophy of Culture.’

expanded in many ways. ‘The etymology and earliest use of the word *li* is to do with religious rites and its connection with sacrifices to spirits’ (Cua 2003, 370). According to the *Shuowen jiezi*, an ancient Han dictionary and ‘the first real dictionary of the Chinese language’ (Watson 1962, 194), the graph *li* means ‘practice’ – ‘religious practice’ according to Fu (2003, 638). It also means all the various ways of thinking and feeling associated with, and necessary to, a ritual performance – a *li* performance. When translated as ‘propriety’, it refers not just to rituals, but also to proper conduct and the ethical reasoning behind this conduct. ‘It signifies both the convention and the principles which regulate or group life, and particularly the life of kinship groups’ (Liu 1959, 68). Later, the use of *li* was extended to political, social and ethical matters and became a basic concept in the Chinese Confucian tradition (Fu 2003, 638). It eventually came to mean ‘pattern’ and ‘all patterns of behaviour’ and its related symbolism. ‘The *li* in each individual thing is part of a larger pattern that runs through everything’ (Shun 2003, 268).

Li is not just a matter of ceremony, and its Western meanings range between religious ritual, to proper social behaviour, and even etiquette (Schwartz 1985, 22). *Li* is ‘a socio-political order in the full sense of the term, involving hierarchies, authority and power. The *li* must themselves support this authority and power’ (Schwartz 1985, 68). Here Schwartz is articulating *li* within a secular paradigm. However, for more than two millennia, it has also been a concern for traditional Chinese moral life, and in broad terms, a Confucian concern with *dao* (way or Way) – a Chinese religious concern (Cua 2003, 370). Both paradigms are linked however with their concern for the serious (aspects of life).

Depending on the context, and in which discourse it is used, *li* may be translated and understood as ‘religious rites, ceremony, deportment, decorum, propriety, formality, politeness, courtesy, etiquette, good form, good behaviour, [or] good manners..., ‘rites’, rituals, ritual propriety, or ritual rules’, especially if we think of ‘rites’ in the broad sense as including any established practice or set of guides to action stressing formal procedures for proper behaviour. (Cua 2003, 370)

One way to elucidate the meaning of *li* is to examine its conceptual evolution.

Antonio Cua (2003, 370) urges us to follow Hu Shi (1891-1962), and to see *li* first as a rule. He then proposes that it develops into a ‘comprehensive notion embracing all social habits and customs acknowledged and accepted as a set of rules to guide action’ (Cua 2003, 370), and the distinguishing feature that differentiates human beings from animals. Later it becomes associated with concepts of right and reason. That is, any rule that is considered right and reasonable may be seen as *li*, an exemplary rule of conduct. The *li* are the actualization (and symbolic articulation) of what is right.

From the sociological point of view, the *li* are concerned with the maintenance of social structure as a harmonious pattern of roles and statuses. To appreciate the significance of *li*, it is instructive to consider its principle functions by looking at Xunzi’s remark on the origin of *li*:

What is the origin of *li*? I answer that men are born with desires. If their desires are not satisfied, they cannot but seek means for satisfaction. If there are no limits or measures to govern their pursuit, contention will inevitably result. From contention comes disorder and from disorder comes poverty. The ancient kings hated such disorder, and hence they established *li* (rules of proper conduct) and inculcated *yi*

(sense of rightness) in order to make distinctions (*fen*) and boundaries of responsibilities for regulating men's pursuit, to educate and to nourish (*yang*) men's desires, to provide opportunity for their satisfaction (*keren zhi qiu*). They saw to it that desires did not overextend the means of satisfaction, and material means did not fall short of what was desired. Thus, both desires and goods mutually support each other. This is the origin of *li*. (*Lilun*, L417, Watson 1963, 89)

The etymology of *li* and its common translation as 'rites' or 'ritual', and its connection to sacrifices and to spirits, suggests the early use of *li* in a religious context. The religious point of view, as it is expressed above by Xunzi, and in this quote below, is important not for these religious practices *per se*, and not because they worship the spirits of the dead, 'but because of ordinary, human yearning for a long life [*and*] reverence for the dead, especially the beloved dead' (Cua 2003, 381).

The funeral rites [Xunzi also discusses rites for the living and for military affairs and so on] have no other purpose than this: to make clear the principle of life and death, to send the dead man away with grief and reverence, and to lay him at last in the ground. (*A Discussion of Rites: Xunzi*. Watson 1964, 104-5)

This juxtaposition of the dead and living, and the religious with the socio-philosophical, is also seen in other texts including Confucius' *Analects* (3.12) and is what is meant by his oft quoted 'as if' attitude toward the dead as worthy of sacrifice. It is also found in the *Li Ji*, where it is written that King Wen, when sacrificing, served the dead 'as if' he were serving the living. The rites here are used entirely symbolically. They are a symbolic means 'of unifying and honouring the beginning and the end. In these ritual performances, we consciously engage in pretence without

self-deception, in order to express our moral emotions of respect and reverence in a proper setting' (Cua 2003, 382).

We know that rites and rituals are symbolically important in a social sense, and they also belong in the religious domain either through their importance as a function of the serious life or in their spiritual and metaphysical roles. All these *significants* were recognized by the early sages such as Confucius and Xunzi, and they have been important in Chinese philosophy and in Chinese culture ever since. Worshipping the ancestors is both a function of this world and the other – they need not be separated.

6:3 *Li* expanded

In the *Tso Chuan* [*Zuo Zhuan*], 'China's oldest work of narrative history' (Watson 1989, xi), traditional Confucian concepts such as *ren* (benevolence), *de* (virtue), and *yi* (righteousness) are numerous, 'but the key term of the *Tso's* doctrine is *li* (rites, ceremonies, sense of propriety)' where it refers to 'specific rules of conduct which govern religious and social ceremonies' (Watson 1989, 45). However, as in many Chinese philosophical texts, the meaning of the word is extended, and it becomes a moral principle, and a principle which even extends to the natural and cosmic worlds. *Li* as rites becomes the exemplar and *raison d'être* of *li* as principle, pattern or reason, and it 'developed into perhaps the most important concept in Chinese philosophy beginning in the Northern Song period' (Liu 2003, 364). This section is concerned with the extension and expanded use of *li*, and it confronts two questions: first, what is the relation between *li* as rites and *li* as principle; and second, what is the relation between *li* as rites and Chinese culture?

By showing, previously, the connection between ancestor worship and ritual, between ritual and *li*, and here between the *li* of ritual and the *li* of principle, the importance of ancestor worship is further enhanced through its connections with philosophy and its articulation and understanding via philosophy. Chinese philosophy is one particular means which enables a clear view of the fundamentals that underpin the culture; it is both a constituent of Chinese culture and a means to understand it. It is a ‘conscious effort to formulate, [and articulate], views and values as expressions of the fundamental beliefs of a people’ (Cheng 1999, 493).

All schools of ancient philosophy recognized the value and importance of *li*, relating it initially to human activities. Even the Daoists who are renowned for their dislike of ritual made reference (*Zhuangzi*) to the ‘*li* of heaven or earth, or *li* of the “myriad things” and took *li* to be something transcendent and metaphysical’ (Liu 2003, 365). The Mohists mentioned *li* in correlating names with reality. Both approaches took *li* as something closely related to human activities. It was the Confucianist Xunzi's use of *li* which came to have the most insightful understanding of its normative cultural significance. His emphasis on cultural activities such as rites and music profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy.

Xunzi commented that

You pray for rain and it rains. Why? For no particular reason, I say. It is just as though you had not prayed for rain and it rained anyway...But it is not as though you hoped to accomplish anything buy these ceremonies. They are done merely for

ornament. Hence the gentleman regards them as ornaments, but the common people regard them as supernatural. (*Xunzi: A Discussion of Heaven* in Watson 1964, 85)

This should not be equated however, as it often is, as Xunzi understanding *li* as only having a social or political value. In fact he elevated *li* to a principle of the cosmos. Notwithstanding his scepticism towards *li* as a superstition, he shared a cultural worldview that saw the synthesis of the human, the natural, and the cosmic worlds.

Li (理) as principle, the homophone of *li* (礼) as ritual, was an important concept in ancient Chinese culture and the philosophy which eventually articulated it. Originally *li* was used in reference to patterns on jade, and correspondingly, had religious inferences. It not only referred to the carvings on the jade, but also inferred the generic idea of culture itself as it emphasised the transformation of a valueless piece of rock into a valuable and refined cultural object (Liu 2003, 364). ‘*Li* (principle) originally meant ‘to “put in order” and can therefore be understood as “pattern” and order, but in the long evolution of the concept it came to denote principle, and it has been in this sense that most Chinese philosophers have used it’ (Chan 1967, 367).

To understand the connexion between ritual/*li* and principle/*li*, it is necessary to first understand how ritual was understood in early Chinese philosophy. ‘Ritual (*li*), according to Xunzi, ‘is the constant *principle* of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the proper action of mankind... Ritual determines the relations of high and low; it is the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth and that by which the people live’ (Watson 1989, xxiii). Xunzi’s understanding of *li* had a profound influence on the subsequent development of Chinese thought. His conception of *li* has systematic import as it

concerns the ‘order of things’, a concept and meaning closely related to, or used as, the meaning of *li* as principle.

Xunzi placed special emphasis on cultural activities such as rites and music, which formed a comprehensive *hierarchical order*²³. Xunzi’s thought influenced later Confucian scholars who composed chapters of the Book of Rites. For example, the chapter on music took *li* (rites) to be manifestations of *li* (principle, pattern or reason). (Liu 2003, 365)

This concern is made clear in their predisposition to associate *li* (ritual) with its homophone *li* (principle) (Cua 2003, 370). The connection between the concrete actions of rituals with the theoretical concept of principle is important as it goes to the way the culture is understood philosophically. Xunzi recognized that ‘the meaning of ritual is great indeed.’ And he cautioned that those who try and ‘enter it [explain its meaning] with the uncouth and inane theories of system-makers will perish there’ (A *Discussion of Rites*, Watson 1964, 95). Xunzi says that the *li* pertaining to funerals ‘have no other purpose than this: to make clear the *principle* of life and death’ (A *Discussion of Rites*, Watson 1964, 105). He also juxtaposes the meanings of *li* and *li* when he says that ‘Music embodies an unchanging harmony, while rites represent unalterable *reason*’ (A *Discussion of Music* in Watson 1964, 117). Where Xunzi is finding the ‘*principle* of life and death’ in the funeral rites, and ‘unalterable *reason*’ in rites, he was also finding *li* in *li*; principle, reason, pattern, and order of things in ritual; he was extending the meaning of ritual, (especially of rituals concerning ancestors), through connections with other meanings.

²³ My *italics*

Later Confucians also expressed similar views. In the Neo-Confucian text, *On the Substance of the Way* (Chan 1967, 16), it is written ‘that which is inherent in things is principle’ (1: 15). However, it is also written that ‘Humanity is the *correct* principle of the world. When the correct principle is lost, there will be no order and consequently no harmony’ (1:17). Also, it is clear that ‘what exists before physical form constitutes the Way. What exists after physical form constitutes concrete things. Nevertheless, though we speak in this way, Concrete things are the way and the way is concrete things’ (1:19) (Chan 1967, 18). In relation to how this might work, and how the world might be understood (‘Investigation of Things and the Extension of Knowledge’), Zhu Xi (1130-1200) provides an example when he says ‘that it is not enough to know about the *li* pertaining to a particular instance [for example, filial piety]. One has to *act* on it in order to realize, personally, that this is genuinely *li*’ (Shun 2003, 268).

The *li* in each individual thing or affair is part of a larger pattern that runs through everything, and by repeatedly examining different things and affairs, one uncovers this underlying pattern. This process is not induction or empirical generalization but more like penetration or insight into what lies behind observable things and affairs. (Shun 2003, 268)

This understanding and appreciation of *li* as principle, or pattern, or reason became a ‘most important concept in Chinese philosophy’. As Confucianism lost its influence, at least at court, and Buddhism became the favoured philosophy of the times, it too succumbed to the cultural influence of *li*, although for the Buddhists it became a metaphysical concept. *Li* (principle) gained its philosophic importance again with the

study of *li* during the era of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism, where it provided the name for the period and its style of practice – ‘Song-Ming *lixue*’ (Liu 2003, 364).

Song-Ming neo-Confucian philosophers related *li* as rites to *li* as principle, noting the extended meaning of *li* as rites as ‘not just something artificially designed by humans to maintain the social and political order; rather rites were based on *tianli*, the heavenly principle inherent in human nature’ (Liu 2003, 369). However, this Chinese philosophic understanding of principle differs from the Western logocentric understanding ‘and modes of analysis by virtue of its inherently historical, contextual and practical character’ (Thompson 2003, 618). *Li* as pattern was not the same as a platonic form or a universal [Western idea of] principle. Rather, *li* represented the inner patterning which structures and relates all phenomena (Thompson 2003, 618). ‘The ancients never spoke of principles detached from particular things’ (Zhang 1998, 6).

Li, as pattern or principle, is the pattern or order underlying everything and explaining why things operate as they do, as well as that to which the operation of things should conform. For example, it is *li* that trees flourish in the spring and fade in the autumn, that fire is hot and water cold, or that a boat travels on water and not on land. In the human world, *li* includes all the norms of human conduct; for example, it is *li* that parents are compassionate to children and children filial to parents, or that human beings do not cut down trees unnecessarily. (Shun 2003, 268)

Cheng Yi is credited with emphasising the notion of ‘heavenly principle’ (*tianli*), which helped the *daoxue* philosophers offset the Buddhist ontological claims of ‘emptiness’ where everything is empty or void of inherent existence. For Cheng Yi,

rituals and the social order they gave authority to were part of the cosmic order. Cheng Yi commonly refers to ritually indebted social and political institutions of his time as being ‘grounded in heavenly principles.’ He wrote extensively on rituals pertaining to the family and lineage, and his views had a great influence on Zhu Xi. Zhu Xi’s thoughts on ritual are exposed by his comment that ‘ritual is the particular manifestation of heavenly principle’ and ‘since rituals embody heavenly principles the phrase simply means “eradicating all selfish desires and returning completely to heavenly principles”’ (Chow 2003, 651).

In order to appreciate further the extended meaning of ritual/*li*, and also to help expose better the relationship between ritual and Chinese culture, it is also important to note the relationship between *li* and culture. In a section above we explored the connections between ritual and Chinese culture. Here we explore a more nuanced connection – that between *li* and Chinese culture. Qian Mu (1895-1991) does not extend *li* in the way the Song-Ming *lixue* scholars did, but he does extend our understanding of it when he links *li* (as the meaning close to the English word ritual) to Chinese culture. In his ‘Lesson on Chinese Culture’ (Dennerline, 1988: 9), he notes, as others have, that ‘there are no Western language equivalents for the word *li*’ and then proceeds to unpack its extended meaning in a unique manner. For Qian Mu, especially when comparing Chinese culture to Western culture, *li* is ‘a general concept that applies to standards of customary behaviour throughout the Chinese world and distinguishes Chinese culture from all others’. The West, according to his understanding, does not have this ‘customary [pan-Western] understanding of culture’, and it distinguishes between cultures by comparing *fengsu*, (local customs). This is not appropriate for an understanding of Chinese culture, for local customs vary

greatly from place to place. However the *li* are the same²⁴. ‘For a Westerner, culture is bound to place, but for a Chinese, culture is universal - so that local customs only serves to distinguish place’.

The universality of Chinese culture, as opposed to the plurality of Western culture, has already been made abundantly clear throughout this thesis and especially in the chapters on socio-political significance and filial piety. To recap, and in Qian Mu’s words:

The *li* that are the standards for the family – its internal relations, its external relations, birth, marriage, death – are equivalent to the *li* that are standards for the workings of government and state ceremonies – internal relations, relations between state and society, recruitment, treaties, successions. This is the only way to understand Chinese culture. It is different from customary practice. (Dennerline 1988, 9)

Here Qian Mu uses the word ‘equivalent’ where throughout I have used the word ‘connection’. We are both saying something very alike. Qian also sees similar connections to ancestor worship (as ritual) and the broader socio-political realm, as Chinese culture, when he writes that the family (*jia*) is the place in Chinese culture where *li* is transmitted. This is both a logical and a normative truth. *Li*, as the rituals of ancestor worship, finds the nearest ancestor within the family – and tautologically the ancestor can only be found within the family. When the ‘standards of social relationships’, the *li*, are extended beyond the family to the wider kin group, and then beyond that to both sides of the family and so on, a ‘people’s descent group’, or

²⁴ See Chapters 2 and 3 for discussion concerning the universality of *li* despite local customs.

minzu, is made. ‘The Chinese are a *minzu* because the *li* set the standards in social relations for all the people. Where practices vary from the *li*, it is because of local custom or economics which are subject to change’ (Dennerline 1988, 9).

Li, as a cultural imperative, finds expression in Chinese philosophy and the classical Chinese literature – a place where this thinking is articulated. Although, according to Qian Mu, ‘the classical literary language gave one access to the metaphorical power of the sages and prose masters of the past’, a full appreciation of *li* may only come about by practice (Dennerline 1988, 15), or by some other sympathetic commensurable means which overcomes the inadequacy of the texts. Modern literary and hermeneutical study informs us that the texts, including the sacred texts of any religion or culture, depend on their meaning within the context of the use and of the receptivity of the reader’s mind. Ritual/*li* was the idea imposed upon the culture by the culture and articulated and sometimes analysed by the literati or *Ru*. ‘So long as the customary practices of the people could be explained as consistent with *li*, they were tolerated and [cultural] unity was maintained’ (Dennerline 1988, 164). And as long as political practices were consistent with *li*, they too would be tolerated.

In his ‘brilliant’ and ‘intricate’ study of *li* (Cua 2003, 635) as a concept in Chinese thought, Tang Junyi (1978) proposes that there are six different [expanded and extended] meanings. ‘The evolution of *li* refers to its increasing extension’ (Cua 2003, 635). One of those meanings, its initial meaning, is *li* as *wenli* – ‘principle in cultural activities’. With Tang’s interpretation of principle in relation to culture, and Qian’s interpretation of *li* in relation to culture, the correlation between the two homophones is complete.

6:4 Ritual as communication.

An understanding of communication as culture, and a ritual view of communication, implies that culture defines and maintains itself through ritual. It highlights the influence of ideology on and by media, but recognises the forces of culture and humanity. Culture is not a top-down process, a process dominated by the social and political elite, but a complex process of ritualization leading to collaboration and community. Any over-simplified cause-effect or progress model of society and cultural communication hides the complex normative way power works within the cultural mix.

An underlying theoretical imperative of this thesis is to show not just *what* something is, that is not just to expose and analyse, but also to try and understand *why* something is what it is? That is, what is the meaning of the ritual or symbol under consideration? Here I want to make clear why ancestor worship, as ritual, is central to Chinese culture. I have already shown its ubiquity; its relationship to filial piety; its social and political significance; and explored the question of what thoughts were behind the worship and the rituals concerning the ancestors. It remains the task of this section to show why, or at least one way of understanding why, these rituals have had such an enormous impact in Chinese culture's development and continuity.

Ritual, in the generic sense, is a powerful and most effective form of communication. From a sociological-religious point of view, i.e. a Durkheimian view, it is an element of the serious life. All cultures utilize ritual as a symbolic means of maintenance and for adapting to outside influences. Dewey reminds us that

Men live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common...are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – likemindedness as sociologists say....Consensus demands communication. (Dewey 1966, 5-6)

This quote by Dewey is enlightening because not only is it by an influential thinker, and one who incidentally taught in China, it reveals his 'emphasis on a ritual view of communication' where 'communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (Carey 1989, 22-23). Furthermore, and just as significantly, his views of community are very similar to Clifford Geertz's views of culture which underpin the approach used in this thesis.

A ritual conception of communication is an alternative to the usual way communication is viewed. The more common way is to see communication as transportation or transmission, where communication emphasizes (new) information and the efficient and effective use of transmission across space. The ritual view calls attention to the original, socially significant meaning, and to the preservation of society in time. Transmission, as an approach to communication, accentuates power and control, whereas ritual accentuates social participation and culture (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

The hegemony of Western Enlightenment discourse usually considered rituals as arational, non-rational, or non-instrumental (Parsons 1954) because they do not meet the demands of scientific rationality from the point of view of an objective scientific

observer (Parsons, 1968). When rituals are used as if they were instrumental or scientific, they are most often labeled as magic, or would be thought of by the scientific observers as arational. The nineteenth century anthropologist Frazer defined magic as the bastard science because it claims to be able to change the physical state of the world by metaphysical means instead of real science, which alters the physical world by technical means (Leach 1976, 29).

Marxist theory focuses on ideology and how it functions within society. Rituals are seen to work ideologically as instruments of the central institutions and ideas of society, and thus of power. Dominant ideas are reputed to be the ideas of the ruling class which, set in most popular cultural forms, support their interests, though it is done surreptitiously. Furthermore, it is the bourgeois interests which underpin popular culture. Ritual performance is equated with myth, 'which, if not presented as class interest, is a form of lying, of intentional confusion, or even magic or witchcraft' (Rothenbuhler 1998, 34).

Although Marxist theory adds to our understanding of ritual, it is far from the whole intricate story. The social orders we are trying to understand are complicated; so must be our explanations of them, so our understanding of ritual and also of ideology require an appreciation of this complexity. If we are to critique ritual, it must be a substantive critique, based on the values and beliefs being promulgated and not on a formal critique, simply based on the fact that it is a ritual. As Rothenbuhler (1998, 12) maintains, ritual works by, and generates its own rationality and logic of signs, meanings, and morals; a logic different from that of technical rationality.

Another influential discourse concerning ritual emphasizes ritual action as sacred – that is, it emphasises its religious function. One problem with this discourse ‘is that the substance of the sacred varies wildly from community to community, culture to culture, historical setting to historical setting’ (Rothenbuhler 1998 118). However, the real problem in relation to the ‘epistemological oversight’ of the study of ritual is not the meaning of the sacred, or even of religion, but that the religious, and therefore ritual as sacred, is (now commonly seen as) secondary to secular and scientific thinking. This Western oversight of ritual helps explain why the Western understanding of Chinese culture either ignores or underestimates the importance of ritual in Chinese culture.

[N]either our understanding of ritual nor of ideology is promoted by facile critiques that replace analysis with debunking, questions with presumptions, agnosticism with hostility. The social orders we are trying to understand are complicated; so must be our explanations of them. (Rothenbuhler 1998, 34)

Ritual is also used as a synonym for habit and routine, and so in popular usage at least, it is often trivialized, although when it does correspond with Durkheim’s ‘serious life’, it is not the ritual (meaning) under consideration here.

Communication, (and this explanation will also be applicable to culture), is both clearly and essentially a fusion of thought and matter, of the subject (who thinks) and the object (of thought), and of the individual and the collective. Communication is internal ideas and experience put in material form by some individual in order to be understood by some others within a community. Here, with this synthetic social world

view, a study of ritual as communication leads to consideration of important aspects of social order which are symbolically constructed.

Ritual as communication is a cultural strategy that focuses on and encourages social participation and the preservation of meaning within that culture. A ritual understanding of communication, as opposed to a transmission understanding of communication, provides a different view of culture as it focuses on a different range of problems and situations. Take for example the simple daily ritual of reading a newspaper, as Carey (1990, 22) does. Or, to extend the example further, consider imbibing on our daily quota of instant electronic news, or even reading secondary articles in journals or books which are themselves dependent on this daily or instant type of information. Reading a newspaper, other associated and similar texts, or watching a monitor, is for Carey 'less [about] sending or gaining information and more [about] attending a mass [or any type of religious meeting], a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed.'

In relation to China and the project of understanding China's culture, this ritual view of communication, brings to bear a suspicion that the means by which information is transmitted is perhaps not as objective as we may think it is. News reading, current affairs bulletins, journals, and by extension texts written and selected by those who are informed by these 'news' facts-of-the-world, are a ritual acts.

What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world...We recognize, as with religious rituals, that news

changes little and yet is intrinsically satisfying; it performs few functions yet is habitually consumed...Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (Carey 1989, 21)

In Western culture the transmission view of communication is the most usual view: communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people. Historically, from the so-called 'Age of Expansion' in the West, communication may be seen as 'an attempt to revolutionize the conditions under which culture was made and disseminated', to re-create and resettle European culture in the far flung reaches of the globe' (Carey 1989, 17). When we consider the religious implications of European expansion, we may also extrapolate the moral meaning of transportation, to mean the 'extension and establishment of God's kingdom on earth'. The moral meaning of communication was the same, for it designated a process that was intended to 'spread, transmit, and disseminate [religious] knowledge, ideas, and information farther and faster with the goal of controlling space and time' (Carey, 1989: 16-17).

The ritual view of communication, although it pre-dates the transmission view, is still uncommon in Western thought. In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, alliance, fellowship, membership, and 'the possession of a common faith' (Carey 1989, 18). A ritual view of communication is the representation of shared beliefs. Xunzi, in the chapter 'Rectifying Names' in the *Xunzi*, focuses on language because he wants to reassert that ritual (*li*) is the only standard of correct behaviour. '[He believed that] since

reality cannot be a standard of correctness in language, the default standard must be convention' (Hansen 2003, 574).

Western scholarship usually situates ritual as an important concept in religion, anthropology, ethnography, sociology and psychology, and it is also often treated in the same categories as religion, magic and myth (Chow 2003, 647). Whereas the relationship between religion, European expansion, and transmission as communication is noted above, the ritual view has the earlier links with religion. Before the gospel, the word, and the sermon gained priority, prayer, chant, and ceremony were the most vital elements in religion. As Western culture moved through the eras of religion as ritual to religion as text and on to the Enlightenment era and its values and ideals such as individuality, rationality, and scientific truth, ritual as communication, communication as culture, and indeed the idea of culture itself became back-grounded. Culture is what other peoples have, and it is only recently that culture, as a universal condition, has gained much credence in Western thought, and with that acceptance has come a renewed focus on ritual as communication, communication as culture, and ritual as an inherent part of culture. It is clear that ritual has been central to Chinese culture and that ritual has been an element of the Chinese serious life for thousands of years. It is also clear that ritual and communication are closely related and that they share many family characteristics (Cheal 1992, 363).

Any critique of ritual must be as complex as the confluence of values and beliefs within a culture and 'not a formal critique, based simply on the fact that it is a ritual. This section, through its emphasis on ritual as communication, is just one of many

ways to assess the value of ritual and rituals within Chinese culture. The specific rituals of ancestor worship have their own particular meanings and uses, and that is the emphasis of the thesis. However, the reason the Chinese have chosen this ritualized culture pathway or strategy is tied to the efficacy of ritual as communication. ‘The ritual conception of communication calls our attention back to the meaning of things’ (Rothenbuhler 1998, 123), and it is shared meanings of the cultural values within the rituals of ancestor worship that make this critique so important.

6:6 Conclusion

The underlying question of this chapter asks why was ritual (*li*) has been so important in Chinese culture from ancient to modern times. The question is generally answered by showing the correlative connections between ancestor worship and ritual. The aim of the question has been to further show and explain the significance of the ancestors in obtaining a better understanding of Chinese culture. It has also linked the body or content of the thesis, which is an exposition of ancestor worship, within the universal concept of ‘culture’ and the particular culture of China. It has achieved this by showing the connections between ritual and culture, ritual and *li*, *li* and culture, culture as communication, culture understood symbolically as a ritual, and ritual communication. Here the connections between the practice of ancestor worship and between Chinese culture is made clear. The rationale of connections is: ancestor worship – ritual – communication – culture. Put another way, the rituals of ancestor worship, understood and extended to mean ‘ritual’ or *li*, have always been extremely important to Chinese culture. When the meaning of *li* is extended to principle, ‘it is

the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth and that by which the people live' (*Tso Chuan* in Watson 1989, xxiii). It becomes something 'transcendent and metaphysical' and cosmological; the *li* of the "myriad things" (Liu 2003, 365). Having this cultural worldview, ritual (*li*) becomes a cultural imperative as a means of continuing the (successful) culture. The rituals of ancestor worship, as rites/*li* were a practice made compulsory by the culture for the culture.

There was good reason why so much emphasis was placed on ritual, and it was not just a matter of genteel-manly behaviour or of political expediency, but was a matter of cultural transmission – a matter which was obvious even to the ancient Chinese, and a matter recently articulated by Western theorists as a concern of communication:

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality. (Carey 1989, 18)

The rituals of ancestor worship were a sociological emphasis on cultural strategy, on a communication strategy, where the community past, present and future join together in solidarity, harmony, and strength over time.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Consequences

John Blair (1993, 29) reminds us that the cross-cultural understanding that we seek here concerning Chinese culture is also a matter of comparison with and understanding of our own, Western culture:

It is precisely the function of comparative culture studies to make basic postulates explicit in the process of comparing one way of life with another, in particular by using the cultural other to bring into conscious definition unspoken presuppositions that inform familiar habits of mind.

One purpose of intercultural studies, according to Arthur F. Wright (1953, 2), ‘is to ask large and important questions’ concerning our world. We must ask these larger questions, he adds, or ‘abdicate in favour of bolder but less qualified men.’ We may also contribute further by proposing changes to ‘the [current] hypothesis, or in the techniques of inquiry, when these seem ill suited to the culture’ we are studying.

These comments, written over half a century ago, form the basis for my concluding discussion. They are from the introduction of his book *Studies in Chinese Thought*, a topic which is addressed throughout this thesis, albeit from another direction – thought underpinning action: practice theory. The book is part of a series called *Comparative Studies of Cultures and Civilizations* and I mention that merely to reinforce the idea or goals which Wright mentions. The intention of this thesis is to

ask large and important questions about Chinese culture and in doing so to ask large and important questions concerning our world. However, before addressing the questions concerning importance, I want to address Wright's other proposal concerning changes to techniques which may be 'ill suited' to our type of inquiry.

The thesis has proposed changes to the conventional and contemporary hypothesis, that Confucianism is a metonym for traditional Chinese culture. These changes are made because I found that the current master narrative of *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* was 'ill suited to the culture' I was studying. I was suspicious that the texts were a true and reliable representation of the culture as a whole, and wary that the Confucian texts, due to the (Western) way Confucianism had been *invented*. In my mind, the West's understanding of China and Chinese culture is problematical due to the 'globalization of the Western order' where 'it has become impossible to speak with sole reference to traditional texts and without reference to Western notions' (Al-Azmeh 1991, 468).

In order to rectify and overcome this epistemological problem, I have proposed a new and alternative approach to the understanding of China and Chinese culture, which embodies an argument that primarily concerns itself with what people do. Of particular interest are those practices which are identified as symbolic and important. My approach has been to ask why these practices were and still are practised, what were and are the conditions for their existence, and what are the implications of these practices for a better understanding of China? I have proposed that a study of ancestor worship and its corollaries is much better suited as an epistemological key for understanding Chinese culture. In doing so I have relied upon a raft of contemporary

theories to underpin a new method or technique of inquiry – more aptly referred to, I think, as an *approach* to understanding. (By calling it an approach I want to suggest the freedom of constraint found in the transdisciplinary manner of inquiry).

My approach is simply to give more emphasis to a specific practice, the practice of ancestor worship and its corollaries of filial piety and ritual throughout their long and continuous history, and is underpinned by a number of theories which I have mentioned in the Introduction and sometimes throughout the thesis. In our endeavours at cross-cultural understanding it is ‘more helpful to ground our understanding in the particularity of a concrete situation than to draw general conclusions with claims to absolute truth’ (Zhang 1998, 6-7). Ancestor worship has been one key symbol that I identified in my research as being important and ubiquitous throughout the entire story of Chinese culture.

In arguing for the importance of ancestor worship as a means for understanding China, the influences of those underpinning theories gradually becomes apparent. Lyotard (1984) warns us against traditional social theory with its emphasis on foundations or universal criteria for truth found within metatheory and grand-narrative, claiming it has lost its legitimacy. Belief in the so-called rationally liberating potential of metatheory ‘is to be seduced by the logocentric pretense of the Enlightenment’ (Ulin 2001, 183). Post-modern theories, especially the ‘suspicion of grand-narratives’ and post-colonial narratives caused me to reject the status quo of the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* narrative. These mostly Western narratives had for the first half of the twentieth century and up to the 1960s represented the bulk of Western academic work in the area of understanding Chinese culture.

Just as Wittgenstein's (2003, §131,133) aim in the *Philosophical Investigations* was to 'achieve a kind of understanding that comes from seeing the particular concrete case in the right light', so is mine here. And like his work, mine also is 'not theory or a set of positive claims but the understanding which consists in seeing connections and not in making theories. My aim has been to argue for a better understanding by making a positive case for ancestor worship and showing it 'in the right light'. Most importantly, I have followed Wittgenstein's (2003: §133) epistemological dictum that 'our claims about what we see in the world avoid emptiness only in respect to their connections, and so the role of connections has been pivotal in making the case for my hypothesis.

My initial task was to provide a description of ancestor worship, and especially to point out that it is a practice that has been ubiquitous throughout Chinese history. Here I emphasized the socio-political connections and the cultural connections as we explored the seemingly innocuous primitive religious rites and practices of ancestor worship. This description-with-connections of Chinese worship provides both the meaning of ancestor worship, especially in its broader context, but also and most importantly it highlights the universal and comprehensive nature of ancestor worship as an important cultural symbol over the entire course of Chinese history and culture.

The next connection I made is how ancestor worship may also be understood within the categories and paradigms of philosophy and religion. It dealt with the importance of the ancestors in the minds of the Chinese and in the Chinese mind, and in the inception of Chinese culture. Here we begin to see the unique aspects of Chinese culture that are necessarily connected to the worship of ancestors. The subject of

much of this philosophy is humanity as a social concept. Starting with reverence for the ancestors, with the parents as the closest ancestor, it connects, with an emphasis on family, to the larger social realm and even to the cosmos. The worldview and social strategies which originated in ancestor worship and which profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy also had a connection with the socio-political orders. Filial piety, as a connection and correlate of ancestor worship, also connects the individual to the larger family-kin-ancestor, and eventually to the cosmos. In philosophic terms it provides the ontological and cosmological grounds for the unified worldview; one that is dynamic and does not require a creator God. Its biological connections allow communication across space and time. Analogically, as a cultural connection, it connects the biological with the social and the political. 'Filial piety is at the very heart of Chinese culture' (Holzman 1998, 199) and as a correlate of ancestor worship, each depending on the other for conceptual existence. Ancestor worship, thus, may also be seen as what is 'markedly Chinese' and 'at the very heart of Chinese culture'.

The most important connections I made in regards to the thesis proposition are with Chinese ancestor worship and ritual. This is important because ritual itself, as it is used in Chinese culture, also has a number of connections. The central role of ritual in Chinese culture is well known and has not been challenged, but what has not been well understood is why ritual has played such a prominent role in the inception and maintenance of Chinese culture. In answering this question I make the correlative connection between the rituals and rites involved in ancestor worship and the generic term 'ritual'. I also make the connection between ritual and the Chinese word *li* which is most often, inadequately though, translated as 'rites' or 'rituals'. The meaning of *li*

is explored to show its more generous denotations and its eventual connections with *li* as 'principle' and therefore a more universal and metaphysical concern. Having explored the wide range of meaning attributed to ritual and *li*, and its wider connections, another connection is made. This connection shows that the rituals employed in ancestor worship, and also the next level of rituals generally which emanated from this worship (ritual/*li*) were important in that they were a powerful and most effective form of cultural communication.

The message they carried was not only one of temporal connections with ancestors and heirs, but a message of important social significance for the present lives of the Chinese. Confucius, we are told, developed arguments for Chinese ritual life that also reinforce the social efficacy of ancestor worship. In the *Book of Rites (Li Chi)* he said,

According to what I have heard, of all things by which people live the rites are the greatest... Without them they would have no means of regulating the services paid to the spirits of heaven and earth; without them they would have no means of distinguishing the positions proper to father and son, to high and low, to old and young; without them they would have no means of maintaining the separate character of the intimate relations between male and female, father and son, elder brother and younger, and conducting intercourse between the contracting families in marriage, and the frequency or infrequency (of the reciprocities between friends). These are the grounds on which superior men have honoured and revered (the rites) as they did. (Legge 1975, 261-262)

In exploring the connections between ancestor worship and ritual, much use has been made of the Confucian connection; indeed this has been the case throughout the thesis. So the question begs: how is it that the underlying assumption of this thesis is that the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* discourse is inadequate, yet I have

consistently had recourse to the Confucian texts as evidence for my arguments for ancestor worship as its replacement master narrative?

The short answer is that Confucianism is important, though it contains much more and also much less than what is essential and fundamental for understanding Chinese culture. There is not a neat fit between Confucianism and Chinese culture but a kind of disjuncture between the Confucian canon as the 'official accounts' of Chinese culture, and what people actually do and have done for millennia. 'In other words, what is it that produces behaviour, if it is so clearly not the cultural knowledge which is revealed in, what Bourdieu refers to as, 'official' public discourse' (Jenkins 1992, 69)? This thesis has argued that it is an emphasis on ancestor worship, and that the focus on *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* is most often irrelevant to a cultural understanding, although it is obviously relevant and important in other ways. Besides the obvious hermeneutical problems of the Confucian texts referred to previously, Confucianism is not a true (or adequately accurate) reflection of Chinese culture. Some texts are, of course, more reflective than others (although there is no real scholarly consensus on these either), but many, by various degrees, are not.

But the problems with *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* are even more serious than this. The major problems are epistemological and ideological. The problem for the West in understanding China is that the West is a 'bully culture' and imposes its 'transcendental pretense' (Solomon 1993, 13) on all our cross-cultural efforts to know and understand China. And it is this problematic which has been the impetus for this work.

7:1 The Importance of the Thesis

This cultural difficulty of translation, interpretation and finally understanding brings me to a juncture where it is fitting to address the point I opened with concerning the importance of a work such as this: why is it important to understand China through finding meaning in the practice of ancestor worship? Again the answer is relatively simple. First, by understanding China by this means the West will have a better appreciation of the cultural differences. Of course, others have offered this assertion before. Andrew Nathan (1993, 923, 936) makes it clear that ‘to understand the distinctiveness of cultures in comparative perspective is a central undertaking of the modern humanities and social sciences.’ He concludes his essay by asking whether Chinese culture is really distinctive, and answers in the affirmative by stating that ‘anyone who studies it must be convinced that it is, [although] we have far to go to state clearly how it is distinctive and to prove it empirically.’ We cannot, as Nathan wishes, prove it empirically as the phenomenon ‘culture’ is a concept and not amenable to scientific study as such. That is, it is not amenable to scientific laws of measurement, as we can never manage a suitable and agreed definition of culture to enable it to be so. However, what we have done in this thesis is to base our entire argument on empirically observable actions: the practices of ancestor worship. This is a study of interpretation and it is an interpretive method I offer here as I argue, as if in a cultural court of justice, that my interpretation is the better one. ‘The process of argumentation can and should strive towards achieving a preferred interpretation or consensus’ (Ulin 2001, 1290). But our efforts at cultural interpretation are not in vain. We can still affirm, as Nathan does with conviction, that we are convinced of Chinese culture’s distinctiveness.

Again, this is not new, as others have already stated this, but something is new (and important). The means by which we have come to the conclusion of Chinese culture's distinctiveness and a description of this distinctiveness are means not chosen before. Some have relied on their own and other's interpretation of the *Chinese Classics* to depict a world of thought of the Chinese mind; some have relied on historical and archaeological evidence and findings; some have inferred a difference from their sociological/anthological studies. This thesis is close to Nathan's hope that we can prove the hypothesis empirically, by focussing on a certain practice performed by countless Chinese over a number of millennia. So, in effect, we come to the same conclusion about Chinese cultural distinctiveness, but I would argue that our evidentiary base and our overall argument are sounder.

But the method, sounder or more rigorous as it is, is not the most significant feature of the thesis. The real significance lies in its *Chineseness*, or more accurately, in its *non-Western-ness*. This is not the same *Chineseness* which as a discourse so concerns Chinese intellectuals today. What I mean here is more an 'authentic distinction.' For, by eschewing the *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* discourse, this thesis overcomes any negative comparisons between Confucianism and Western religion, philosophy, ethics, social ideals and so on. By understanding China as-it-is and as-it-was, and with less Western-ethno-centric colouring, it makes it easier to appreciate Chinese culture in a more positive light. If there is some agreement that Chinese culture is the most, or at least one of the more enduring world cultures, lasting in excess of four millennia, then a study of its cultural strategies should be seen as important. And they are important both for the Chinese and for the West. For China it means addressing the

‘China problem’. ‘If China is to survive as a nation – united, strong, and independent – it must recognize its own heritage’ (Dennerline 1988, 115).

For the West the implications are different. This brings me to the second point I want to make regarding how an understanding of China through an understanding of ancestor worship is important. As I mention above, it is noticeable over recent times in China that there is a strong move to recognize its own heritage – a heritage that has, over a considerable time span, proven to be conducive to cultural continuity and general cultural wellbeing. However, the concern of this thesis is the Western view of China –how can a better understanding of China’s culture and its successful cultural strategies through a discourse of ancestor worship help us in the West. Firstly and somewhat ironically, I will refer to the twentieth century Chinese philosopher, Qian Mu and to (his view of) Confucianism. Qian Mu argued that in order to understand the spirit of Chinese history, one should study the common people (Dennerline 1988, 153-156). It was the common people and their culture, that the Confucian this-worldly and humanistic ideals distinguish Chinese culture from that of the West (and of India). Chinese culture has never been about a struggle between various political, religious or ideological institutions. ‘The spirit of the culture [may be found in] the belief that the spirit of a person lives on in the mind of others’ (Dennerline 1988, 153-156), and the ‘key to the construction of *Chineseness* is the acceptance of the ritual form’ (Tu 1992, 96).

In this view of Chinese culture, the rituals and ceremonies pertaining to ancestors not only link the present with the past and the future, but importantly reinforce core social relationships and cultural values. The ‘features of the spirit world which enter into

such rituals are not simply an arbitrary collection of mythical figures dreamed up by generations long dead, but mirror the social world and the concerns of the living' (Parish 1978, 249). A full understanding of the import of the connections between reverence for the ancestors and the socio-political realm in China and its total significance to Chinese culture sets in place a rationale that questions many of the standard Western conclusions about contemporary China. This rationale, free from the restrictions of the dominant discourse of *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture*, and any other ideological or culturally biased narratives which prohibit an eyes-wide-opened view, allows an analysis of Chinese culture which appreciates its longevity and strength over time.

The secret of the survivability of Chinese culture lies in the intense self-consciousness of the socialization process ... Therefore, in trying to penetrate the uncertainties of China's future, one needs to seek out insights about Chinese cultural patterns... [and] teaching about China will have to deal less with the abstractions of ideology and policy and more with actual patterns of behaviour' (Metzger, 1977: x)

Following from this more positive understanding of Chinese culture, comparisons with Western culture and its inherent values and cultural strategies become more important and interesting. Colin Mackerras (1987, 61) found that the 'main determinant of Western images of China is the West itself' and that while the object of his discussion was China, the subject was the West. This is also to a certain extent true of this thesis, where my task has been to provide a better and more nuanced cultural understanding of China, with the subject of this understanding being the West.

Adding to these cross-cultural dynamics are a post-modern/post colonial condition which is increasingly questioning the Enlightenment meta-narrative of Western culture; an increasingly more powerful and influential China; and the more recent decline of many of capitalism's most cherished ideals in the wake of what is termed the world financial crisis. It is not my intention here to argue for or against one culture or the other – merely to suggest that when Chinese culture is better understood through the approach suggested by this thesis, some of the ideals and cultural strategies of the West, which have for a long time been the standards for the rest of the world also, are less certain – its transcendental pretense becomes open to doubt. For instance the Western model of democracy and the human rights ideals of the West, once beyond question, are now under growing suspicion and question, as is also the hitherto unquestioned Western assumption of the individual as autonomous (as opposed to the individual connected to community). Western Enlightenment thinking is dogmatic in that it is dismissive of any other cultural views – this is its 'transcendental pretense'. Ancestor worship, as opposed to Confucianism, reveals a fundamental cultural difference from Western 'individualism' as opposed to what the pundits refer to as 'communalism':

The excesses of individualism – laissez-faire capitalism, anarchism, lack of respect for authority, loss of community, histrionic romanticism – all these must be weighed against the fact that, in the Enlightenment and after, individualism was supported by the assumption of universal reason and the natural goodness of human nature.

(Solomon 1993, 14)

I have mentioned early, a number of times, why I think this thesis' alternative means to understanding China is worthwhile. In doing so I have pointed to the concepts, often best encapsulated by Al-Azmeh (1991, 468) of the 'globalization of the Western order'; of 'Western economic and political conquest and hegemony'; and of the subsequent 'correlative conditions of equally real ideological and cultural hegemony.' Many of Al-Azmeh's criticisms are echoed in the debate and discourse surrounding 'Asian values'. This debate and 'most of the issues and impulses that come under its broad umbrella are still alive...but no one talks about "Asian values" *per se*' (Barr 2004, 177).

The core 'Asian values' argument is cultural relativism, and, with Al-Azmeh, makes similar critiques of Western hegemony and that much of the political, social and cultural values accepted as universal norms are in fact Western. The 'Asian values' argument goes further and adds that these norms are no more legitimate than Asian norms.

At its core the 'Asian values' argument is remarkably consistent. Its proponents advocate a hierarchical view of society that emphasizes the interdependence and social nature of human beings. The family has a special place as it is 'the prime conceptual basis of a relational view of society, and because it is a natural and self-sustaining mechanism for providing nurture, socialisation and social services to the population' (Barr 2004, 7).

Reference to Asian values has declined, but its core ideals remain alive. The architect of the debate, Lee Kuan Yew, now says that he no longer refers to Asian values;

however he does refer to 'Confucian values' (Lee Kuan Yew, *Asiaweek*, 21 May 1999). And as this thesis has questioned and found these cultural values to be no more than another name for Chinese cultural values, we can now begin to read a new cultural discourse as 'Chinese cultural values'. Michael Barr (2004, 186) reminds us that:

China will always remain a distinguishing feature of life, economics and politics in East and Southeast Asia. No matter what developments take place in the United States or Europe, Pacific Asia will always have to live with China as a potentially overbearing neighbour – an overwhelming rival and/or a partner in trade and investment...[and] ...The realities of the 'Asian values' discourse are not as permanent as the reality of China.

Although not referring to the Asian values debate, but maybe to some of its underlying sentiments, Robert Solomon (1993, 360) also reminds us that this is not the end of history but only the end of universal history. He calls on us to realize that 'our vacuous individualism can no longer be supported by our pretentious universalism; that we are but one peculiar culture among many, that we have underrated the importance of culture.' As more credence is given to China's history as opposed to the West's (generally) blinkered reading of it; its aversion to warfare and its urge to conformity; and the dominance of its socio-political realm over the military, defence policy strategists in the West can spend less time worrying about China and more time on other more belligerent targets.

The people of China account for about one fifth of the world's population...even in Han/Roman times the Chinese population was vast, probably not less than a fifth of

the world's total then. Its cities were, and long remained, the most crowded, and its fields the most productive. In science, technology and industry it led the way. (Keay 2008, 22-23).

However, the Chinese, unlike their European counterparts, had no global ambitions. During the 'middle ages' a predominately Buddhist China, although aware of the crisis in its 'Holy Land' of India did not participate in a Holy War. Furthermore, even though they also launched transoceanic armadas, just as the European nations were doing, they did not launch these in order to amass spices, or gold, or silver, or to exploit the labour of others or their lands. Their objective was simply to promote and extend harmony throughout 'All under Heaven'. The Chinese empire would remain restricted to China and its immediate neighbours. A fifth of the world's population would advance no claim to a fifth of the world's cultivable land (Keay, 2008: 22-23). China's urge to be there for the next generation and the previous generations far outweighs any ideals which others may impose upon them.

These are some of the important questions and arguments that more readily arise when China is understood through the discourse of ancestor worship, piety and veneration. The distinctiveness of the culture comes to the foreground: its ontological preference for change over substance and presence; its focus on humanity and humanism as the individual in the society and not the individual opposed and separated from others; its reliance on ancestors and their proximity as opposed to a God or heaven; its emphasis on filial piety as opposed to an existential self; and the universality of Chinese culture, as opposed to the plurality of Western culture.

When the rituals of ancestor worship (as *li*) are extended to principle (as *li*), 'it [becomes] the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth and that by which the people live (*Tso Chuan* in Watson 1989, xxiii). With this cultural world-cosmological view in mind, the rituals and reverence involved in ancestor worship become the cultural imperative of Chinese culture, and the best means available for the West to understand China, its people and its culture.

There is no doubt that the Chinese have placed an enormous emphasis on their ancestors and that ancestor worship has played an important and ubiquitous role in Chinese history and culture. An understanding of this cultural emphasis or *significant*, gained through a reading of its connections, provides the Western reader with a more subtle and reliable understanding of China than has previously been available.

There is, at this final juncture, a temptation to replace the metonym of *Confucianism-as-Chinese-culture* with a more suitable alternative. Perhaps the term 'familism' may be considered more appropriate, or even the term 'communalism', which already has wide acceptance in Western discourse and especially in philosophy, may offer a better and acceptable alternative. However, although they are perfectly reasonable descriptors of Chinese culture, they both lack the full epistemic range to be considered as better alternatives to Confucianism. We could always invent a term; and something like 'ancestralism' might suffice. However, unless we always link it with the caveat that it must be understood (and used) only as a referent to ancestor worship; and that as a symbolic action itself it must be understood as a practice; and that it is only through its web of connections that it opens the door to a continuing process of 'hardy work' (Turner 1995, 2); and that the process is one of continuation which requires the

analyst to *investigate things* in a hermeneutical manner, then the metonym is insufficient. This work, if accepted and used as intended, is only a key; ‘a key to an understanding of the essential constitution of [Chinese culture²⁵] (Wilson 1954, 241).’ It is no substitute for hardy work. It is in essence a starting and re-starting point, and it is also a limiting paradigm.

As a hermeneutical work, it is necessarily only temporary. In its use as an alternative means for a better cross-cultural understanding of China, it will both provide a better understanding of Chinese culture, and, in the process, the better understanding of Chinese culture, even if it just more nuanced, will change how we think about Chinese ancestor worship.

²⁵ Monica Wilson here was referring to the study of ritual in the generic sense and so rather than ‘Chinese culture’ her object was ‘human societies’.

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